**B. Holwerda**: Malachi 2: 15 (Wedding sermon text)

Read; Ephesians 5: 15-33.

Beloved in the Lord Jesus Christ.

We have just read together a portion from the letter that is known as “to the Ephesians”. Also in this writing Paul gives “house rules” where he actually places all relationships in life under the light, and under the discipline of Jesus Christ. And in connection with this much attention is placed on the ties between man and wife in marriage.

But it should not escape us that this marriage gospel and portion of family ethics is brought to us here in a strange context. Because when you read what follows these verses of scripture you discover that those who would marry must gird themselves for war. Because the believers are admonished to put on the whole armor of God here, so that they could withstand all the subtle wiles of the devil. The struggle dominates the life of the congregation in all relationships, and therefore also places its mark on marriage life.

And when you read what precedes those “home truths” you are faced with another serious admonition, “see then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil.”

Subtle wiles of the devil, therefore a life of *struggle*.

And with that are evil days which make the *redeeming of the time and the walking circumspectly* an absolute imperative.

Naturally this does not put a damper on the joy of a marriage day but it does put all marriage conduct in the greatest seriousness. Because Paul says it will become a conflict, it will be a matter of practicing the utmost watchfulness and of having to redeem the time.

On her wedding day the bride’s attire attracts the most attention but more important is that other thing. How is it with that attire of God’s armor? He, the Lord, wants to see both in the wedding party harnessed together in this armor!

Oh, you know don’t you that the days are evil and the beginning of a marriage will not see this changed.

Sometimes when I read the public announcements of marriages at city hall which are be solemnized in the coming weeks it was noticeable that behind half of the names there was inscribed ‘divorced from…”.

So some of the candidates had already been at the marriage hall once before. And they risked this step anew. But between these two dates there had been an act of *breaking up* and not as a consequence of death either. But only because it just didn’t’t work any longer!

There is a certain amount of unrest in all societies. It is alarming how many divorces are accepted since the war years. Is this a phenomenon found to be associated with events such as war? Is it a matter of nervous tension that seeks relief in such a tragic way? Or is it that world events have so unbalanced society that people who have become unsettled by the misery will loosen the knot much quicker than before? Could we then expect things to improve if life returns on a more settled course?

Whoever reads and believes scripture will doubt it. The evil sits much deeper. It is the fact that most people who plan to marry, although they may attend church since it is customary after all; no longer believe the church with the heart and confess it with the mouth!

Because when Paul preaches about marriage he also uttered this awfully significant sentence: but I speak concerning *Christ and the church*. He admonishes the wife to be subject to her husband just as the church is required to be obedient to Christ. And he calls the husband to love his wife as Christ had loved His church.

*The church is decisive for marriage*!

Whoever does not know the grace that Christ Jesus demonstrates to His congregation had better not marry. He does not know the blueprint that God has set over his marriage. Whoever does not concern herself with the submission of the church to Christ can not with reassurance give herself to a man because she does not recognize the model according to which she has to establish her marriage.

At the time when Moses had to make the tabernacle, it was told him: see to it that you make everything according to the plan that was shown to you on the mountain. Temple building is not arbitrary nor a matter of personal taste: the construction is tied to the design of the Master Builder.

Therefore the Lord says to all who would marry; see to it that you make your marriage according to the model that I have shown you in the church. Only there you will find the specs and drawings.

The determining question for true marriage success is the question regarding the church. What do you believe about the Holy Catholic Christian Church, the communion of saints? What do you believe about the preaching, of the ministry of offerings and of church discipline?

*Reformation of marriage never comes about without church reformation!*

Therefore we turn to God’s word as spoken by Malachi. In a better translation our text reads as follows: *Has not One made her? His Spirit remains Him! Because what does the One seek? A godly seed! Therefore watch in your sprit that you do not deal treacherously with the wife of your youth.*

*(*Apparently the Hebrew text is not accurately translatable and does not give a clear meaning. It is possible that with some insignificant modifications a more meaningful sense can be found. We read ‘*asah* with *mappik ,* and *oesje’er as nisj’ar.)*

**The text speaks to us about *Church communion and marriage unity*.**

It is preached according to the Scriptures:

1) That church communion is the foundation of marital unity.

2) That church communion is the goal of marital unity.

**ONE**

As you know Malachi is the last prophet of the Old Testament. It seems his work and life was about four hundred year before Christ although there is not much information in his book to come to a definite conclusion.

It was a very dark time for the church. The nation had returned from exile about a century before. Encouraged by Zechariah and Haggai they had then rebuilt the temple and reinstated the sacrificial service because it was to these that the LORD had tied his blessing of life. It was a time of reformation and a new future.

But when we go a century further, temple and life had gone into steep decline. And this decay had mostly affected, --- and here you already have the theme just mentioned---, the break down immediately affected church and marriage.

Things became fundamentally twisted as far as the church is concerned.

Yes, they had the temple and brought their sacrifices there. They had their religion with its church attendance. But the priests, the office bearers, were anything but particular. They did not look too close when a sacrificial animal was brought in. Did someone have a sick animal? Let him take it to the altar! There it will still be worth something. Is there a crippled animal that has to be put down? Take it to the temple; it can still be used there!

The sacrifices had become very cheap in those days. The LORD had always asked for the best from the flock in His service. But the priests said those animals are not so bad that they can’t be used for the temple. They are good enough for the LORD!

And the priests were not so particular in more things. The second task they had to perform was preaching. They had to teach the people the law of the Lord. Their lips had to preserve knowledge and cause many to repent from their unrighteousness. Ambassadors of the LORD of Hosts they were! It was a great thing that the LORD gave priests to His people. Their official office kept the law amid the nation; their preaching was given for the purpose that the power of sin was broken and a new obedience was put into practice.

But what do these priests, who were obliged to carry out such a great responsibility, do? Oh they still preach, but they don’t say much. There preaching was slack, ineffective! There duty was to lift those who stumbled and cause the fallen to walk anew in the ways of the Lord. But in reality they did the opposite! Their preaching caused those who dealt knowledgably in the church to stumble. The training of the priests did not direct anyone to rescue the lost. It is the only reason – thanks to the preaching --- that those who have not stumbled yet come to fall anywaay! They don’t bring the word of the LORD and no longer proclaim the law. They have their own opinions and with the word of men they spoil the church.

As it is now so it was then: the one brings the other. The priests, who in their holy office played with sacrifice and preaching, naturally also dealt lightly and irresponsibly with the practice of church *discipline*. That was the third part of their office.

As I said: in their sermon they came with words that were not of God but came from their own thinking. The inevitable result was that discipline ended in serious disrepute. Consequently when they, as judges, had to decide a matter they did not measure according to God’s rule. They only asked who was in agreement with them. They were hopelessly biased. They had their friends, their own inner circle in the church; it was too bad for you if you were not part of it.

The priests are no longer concerned whether it is a matter of someone’s guilt. They only ask: is the accused one of us? And if that is the case he may be allowed this on his church account too, that way he is sure in advance that he will be acquitted. But if anyone is opposed and is at variance with the priests, accusing them of not taking their office seriously, --- he can be convinced beforehand that at the first and best opportunity he will be dealt with and condemned.

All this terrible messing around in the church unleashes a bitter complaint from Malachi: Don’t we all have one father? Has not one God created us? Why do we deal treacherously with each other and defile the covenant of the fathers?

He has characterized the despicable game in the church with this: it is *treachery*! They no longer see God in the church; they do not tremble before His holiness: they no longer know what the covenant with Him signifies. And because they have removed all of church life from the climate of the covenant they play around with the sacrifices and the preaching. They honor the ritual and something also must be said whenever the people are gathered together. But they have long forgotten that the offering is for the LORD, for whom the best is not really good enough, and that the preaching is the administration of His word. They forget that in the worship service they come before the Father as children. Therefore they no longer ask if their God receives His honor as Father in the sermon and the offering. And because of these things they are no longer safe with each other. If the children in the family don’t honor the father anymore then they are no longer children of one father for each other either. In other words the mutual bond that ties them together they have from the father.

So it also is in the church. Now that they no longer confess God as Father, now that they no longer love His word and no longer take the sacrifices seriously; now it is impossible that they still love each other as children of the one Father. Instead of the bond of the covenant there now is another bond that they make themselves. The church fellowship of children of one Father gives place to a club mentality in which party spirit rules. Now they also have to meddle with discipline. They no longer love the Father. So what does it matter to them if they don’t love the brethren?

When he had said this, Malachi, in one breath, applies all this to the *marriage* scenario.

It is also totally wrong there. Mixed marriage is no longer sin. They no longer honor God as father in the church. How do they then reckon with Him when they go into marriage? When they see a pretty heathen they marry her. With the same heedless ease they therefore leave their Israelite wife in the lurch. Divorce is the order of the day. A letter of divorce is written quickly enough. The priests will give you no trouble. In discipline they make allowances for their own. What more do they want, there is no risk of churchly censure.

They muddle in the church and therefore also in marriage. Yet they come before the altar with tears and sighs. They don’t understand why the hand of the Lord is pressed down so heavily on them and why life is now so difficult for them. They ask why? It is a riddle for them.

But Malachi says: would you please stop asking for the familiar way. You know well enough what is broken down in the church and in marriage. You no longer recognize God as Creator and Father. You don’t know what it means to say: the LORD is your God, the LORD alone! Because you no longer see Him in the church you can’t find Him anywhere.

In church you use slight of hand in the service. You don’t know the Father anymore; therefore you are so partial with discipline. You no longer ask who can stand before Him but you ask who is pleasing to us. You don’t see that God is the father of all anymore, equal in grace for everyone and equal in His law for all. You only ask what these people are to you, sympathetic or not. The bond with Him no longer keeps you together.

That is death for the church, for the worship service, for the preaching and for church discipline. It doesn’t’t strike you as bizarre anymore that people in the temple say: bring anything that is useless for yourself here, God will still take it. No one is appalled when the sermon is filled with pious froth and there is no concern for unjust discipline.

Death in the church! But at the same time also meaning death in marriage! Now that you don’t know the Father anymore you will not for even a second ask if your wife to be is the daughter of an idol or is a child of the heavenly Father. You no longer say: I can’t contemplate divorce for then I would send away one who is my sister in the LORD. Nor do you ask: am I allowed to take for myself a daughter of a strange god nor whether I may abandon a child of my own Father?

If you no longer see the covenant in the church you can never find it in the marriage bond either. Now that the church is kaput all restraints are removed from marriage, it is no matter if you divorce. Devastation of the church is automatically devastation of the marriage!

Therefore Malachi repeats to the men who play off their wives exactly what he said to the priests who make games of the church, --- he repeats the same question that he also asked the priests: do we not all have *one Father?* Did not *one God* create us all?

Don’t you know anymore that the wife that you want to abandon is a child of the same God as you? *Did not One create her?* The One who is professed as Creator and Father in the church? Did he not put her beside you? Did not He who said to you: you are my son, testify about her: she is my daughter?

If you want to see your wife, to see her properly, you must first see God. God as He has revealed Himself in the covenant as Creator-Father of all His children. You will not view your wife rightly if you do not see her in the covenant that the LORD established with her as well as you.

If you let go of these things she will only be a person of flesh and blood to you. Then your relationship with her will only be a matter of flesh and blood. Then you approach her today because of flesh and blood and leave her again tomorrow because the flesh desires something else. It is then never a question of covenant, of faith, of covenant faithfulness, of the LORD!

Do you want to know who your wife is? Not a person of the opposite gender in the first place, but a child of the same Father, your sister.

If you do not profess her as sister in the covenant she will never be safe as your wife in marriage.

She is your sister first, only then and therefore a wife!

First faith and then the marriage!

First the covenant then the natural!

First the church and then the wedding!

Because the bond of the covenant, the communion of faith of the church is the foundation on which marriage rests and remains secure!

And I want to emphasize this as the word of the LORD. We say with blessings and prayers that all who have gone into life together have a great thing.

What would we pray for, for good things and happiness? First we should ask the Lord that the church will always be taken very seriously, also for the sake of marriage!

Solemnization with a wedding service belongs to a marriage. Most people wouldn’t want to see the service abolished for it certainly is a serious step, especially in these uncertain times. The blessing of the Lord is necessary and the service brings consecration.

But I hope you all understand that the church has a fundamental meaning for marriage. The marriage service should not be the end of it! Going to church for a wedding shouldn’t be a coincidental contact with the church, for one time, so that after the service the paths of church and marriage go in different directions.

Does the minister have a task similar to the justice of the peace, or the photographer, or the processor of the marriage license? Do all these have to participate so that each can give their stamp of approval on the wedding day? And that the next day when the bills are paid these various functionaries have no more influence on the ones who married.

Does the church have the same temporary function as city hall, the photographer, the hotel or the reception hall?

Malachi says to the bride groom in the name of the LORD: has not One, your God and Father also made your bride? When things go astray in the church the foundations of marriage are on shaky ground!

Ultimately that one wedding service is not the most important. But the church, its life, its struggle, its reformation. You must see all these things as decisive for marriage.

People will often admit that unity of church is most important for a good marriage. I don’t deny it, but it is not the end of the matter if married people go to the same church. Their names could be written in the same membership book without their truly believing in the church! How many aren’t there who are of one church yet who do not for one second show interest for worship and preaching and discipline?

I have talked many times recently to people whose minister I used to be but who, imitating their consistory, no longer recognize me as an office bearer of Christ. And what bothers me the most is that a great number of them no longer give this and other things any consideration and actually have lost all interest in church matters.

In general they say that they regret the disunity. But if you ask the question: what do you believe concerning covenant and baptism? Then you will hear from many that they don’t care, let the others figure it out.

And if you also ask: if you do really regret the break, have you then determined in regard to the depositions (of office bearers, including Pro. B. Holwerda) that the justice of the LORD has been practiced? Then the worst of it is that most of them don’t say that they are convinced that Christ willed it so – for then the matter would still taken seriously --, but they simply laugh and say: is it so important to you? Come lighten up a little. It was not a gross public sin. There were difficulties and a solution had to be found. So people are slowly getting used to the game of meddling with discipline.

But beloved this spirit will become the death of marriage too! A church member who openly says that matters of covenant and baptism don’t interest him may embrace his wife but he actually gives her a slap in the face. They may not concern themselves about the rights and wrongs of matters of discipline but that fact of not having any interest means they put dynamite under their own future. If people start to think that faithlessness in the church is normal then that same treachery will soon devour their marriages.

Only where husband and wife keep the covenant holy and therefore hate all meddling with the preaching and worship and discipline, only there they will be given and so receive any guarantee with respect to their marriage. Because there they hold fast to each other ‘in the LORD’ and honor each other as fellow heirs of the grace of life.

Then there is not only a natural love that can fade and there is not only a youthful passion that will go dim again. But this love is sanctified and lifted up in the bond of faith. Here love can not pass away because it is fed and eternally renewed by the love that is between Christ and His congregation.

That grace should be preserved because the beginning of marriage is possible through the communion of the church therefore. Remain engaged in the struggle for the church, for the covenant. Especially as married people remain on fire for the questions of preaching and worship and discipline. You can defend your marriage only to the extent that you wrestle for the preservation of the church.. And only when you fight the good fight in the church will you preserve the deep foundation of your happiness. Only when you do your share to keep the church healthy will your family life stay healthy.

Your fellowship will only reach its true purpose in this way.

**TWO**

For Malachi also proclaims that the unity in marriage remains subservient to the development of church communion.

For after he had asked the men: Did not One make her? Is not your wife a child of the one Father as well as you? Is not she your sister in the covenant with the Lord? --. After these questions he says emphatically: The Spirit remains His! *(Having a remnant of the Spirit)*

This phrase is somewhat obscure. Logically there are many interpretations and translations. I won’t tire you with them and will only tell you which interpretation most accurately fits the context.

Malachi had said: God created the woman and took her as His child even as he had done with the man. He established the bond of faith to sustain the natural bond and sanctified natural love through the covenant. But why did the Lord do so? What was His “Spirit” when he made the relationship in this way? What “moved” the LORD? What drove Him? What goal did He seek when He bound, although different in gender, the husband and wife together through the communion of the church?

He sought Godly seed! That was the motif that governed God when He made things this way. That was the ‘Spirit’ of God here. He did not only have the birth of children in view by itself, not only the coming of ‘a seed’. Right from the beginning He desired ‘a Godly seed’! He sought holy seed, church seed. With this in mind He did not put just a natural union between husband and wife but a deep spiritual union of the communion of the covenant.

With out a doubt a marriage by itself would have been sufficient if only bearing children was God’s plan. Then nothing would be necessary but the natural progression of the generations. If marriage exists only for the ordinary bearing of children then a man of Israel could marry a heathen. Why not? After all as long as the man has a wife.

But from the beginning the LORD sought something else. He desired a Godly seed. Not just children of any kind, but children that would be His and would live for Him! But then the bond of the covenant would be necessary. Now it makes a great difference if a man marries the daughter of a strange god, with one who exists outside of the covenant, or if he binds himself to one who is a sister in the Lord. One who along with himself is a child of the same Father and fellow heir of the grace of life.

Now that God seeks a holy seed people can no longer enter into a mixed marriage! Now they can never dissolve a churchly marriage! Whoever marries an unbeliever may desire children but he demonstrates from the outset that the covenant does not interest him and that he does not seek a holy seed. Whoever quits his wife of the children of Israel simultaneously shows that the fellowship of faith has no power or authority in his life. Such a person gambles with the Holy seed that the Spirit of God seeks.

Because, says the prophet, His Spirit has remained Him. That is still the same today. What He originally sought He still looks for today: a holy seed! Therefore you can never gamble with the church communion whether you desire marriage or whether you want to be separated. You are under the discipline of the covenant. The Spirit of God, which seeks a holy seed, is normative for your marriage. The purpose the LORD has with marriage: is namely the seed of God! That purpose shall decide the question with whom you may marry. And that purpose will prevent you from sending your wife, who is your sister, away from you.

The Spirit of God seeks the seed of God. Watch in your spirit therefore that you do not deal treacherously with the wife of your youth. You shall fix all your wishes and ideals, all your intentions and plans, in other words your whole ‘spirit’ to the purposes of God and so tie your spirit to God’s Spirit.

The LORD says: you are not done with only a relationship of blood because since I desire a Godly seed the communion of faith is what is decisive! My Spirit began with the seed of the church and in view of that I made man and wife brother and sister of each other in the covenant. That Sprit has remained with Me. Today I seek the building up of the church and not only propagation and nothing more. I do not desire that the world is filled with people only but I desire a multitude that no one can number. Therefore whoever becomes unfaithful to the wife of his youth not only scorns the foundation of marriage; the communion of brother and sister as children of one Father, --- he negates the purpose that the Father of both attached to marriage: the coming of the holy seed.

Therefore beloved, when the Lord unites young people in marriage then He does not say: please come together with your family to church for an hour for my blessing and for some edification and then go on living for yourself, for each other, for your family and your happiness. But He said: I have grounded your marriage in my covenant, and founded your love on the love that stirred from eternity. I build your relationship and your happiness on the foundation of the church and its unshakable stability.

And I also seek My church through your marriage because I want to come to the large multitude that no one can number. I want to come to a congregation of the 144,000. So on your wedding day you will seek what I seek and desire what I desire. Your spirit will conform to My Spirit. You shall not live for your own ideals but also on your wedding day not forget for one moment that all is established to the will of Christ Jesus. That is I will always praise Thee in the great congregation. You shall not desire just children but children for the Lord.

Shouldn’t we also pray this way for married people? Give that if by Thy grace, as fellow heirs of the covenant Thou hast established with the fathers, they receive children by Thy good pleasure that they may bring them up bearing fruits of Godliness to the glory of Thy holy name*, to the building of the congregation and to the furtherance of holy gospel!*

And beloved if you set you desires according to the Spirit of God you will be comforted and at peace.

When marrying nowadays many are worried when they consider the possibility of having children. The world is so bad, and there are many threats whenever the future turns bleak. Why do we raise children they say? Even Christian parents seem to suffer from this anxiety, why?

Because even though they recognize that the foundation of their marriage has been laid in the church, they still forget that He, the Lord, also seeks His church again through each marriage!

Whoever dreams of a future and sets their ideals, happiness, prosperity and peace, on their own certainly may not find them in these last days. What we might experience may be frightening and bitter?

But whoever ties their ideals to the marriage thoughts of God, whoever bases their purpose on what He seeks. – will dare to go into the future even in these dark times. Because they know that the Lord will accomplish His purpose come what may for He builds His church, He calls the multitude that no one can number. And because we establish our marriage goal on the Spirit of Him; therefore we have the certainty that we will find what we seek. It may be a difficult road and filled with tears, but because He reaches His goal we will reach it too.

Then our marriage ideals are freed from any false security that exists here below.

Others see their happiness break into shards but we see the New Jerusalem descending out of heaven from God. The accomplishments of this world will pass away, but the world itself will not, and the church will not and we and our children will not.

**Amen.**

Sing: Psalm 121: 1, 2, 3

 Psalm 87: 1, 2, 4, 5

 Psalm 25: 6

 Psalm 121: 4

 Psalm 102: 11