

For the Honor of His Name

Malachi 2:1-9

In George Stevens' biblical epic *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, John Wayne made a cameo appearance as a Roman centurion who leads Jesus to his crucifixion. A probably apocryphal story says that when Wayne delivered his only line, "Truly, this was the Son of God" for the first time, Stevens called, "Cut!" He told Wayne, "You're referring to the Son of God here, Duke! You've got to deliver the line with a little more awe." Wayne dutifully did the take again and solemnly declared: "Aw, truly this was the Son of God!"

Reverence in the service of God is at the heart of this morning's text, a warning to priests who had not set their hearts on honoring the name of God. The priests were a "set apart" line of men in Israel who ministered at the temple. Only they could offer sacrifices on the altar. Only they could enter certain areas of the temple. They represented the people before God. They administered the various rituals of worship. But, as we discovered last week, they also had a tendency to slip into rote, mindless religious motion. They even questioned the significance of their duties. Their bad attitudes undermined the whole spiritual life of Israel.

How should the text be applied? I could direct it solely at church leaders, because the example set by the ancient priesthood impacted the whole nation. But, I have to balance that with the fact that the New Testament never identifies pastors, preachers, elders and the like as "priesthood." Insofar as offering sacrifices for sin is concerned, Jesus alone is our great High Priest Who gave Himself as a once for all time sin offering. As far as representing us before God, Jesus is the sole Mediator between man and God, always interceding for us at His Father's right hand. The only true modern priesthood besides that of Christ is that which is shared by every Christian:

⁹But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. - 1 Peter 2:9

The idea that we are a nation of priests emphasizes that we can each enter God's presence without some human mediator to make that possible. We can find the grace we need in our time of need. We can pray to God on behalf of others. We can teach others the things of God. We can minister to others with gifts bestowed on us by the Holy Spirit. We are all priests, which means that no one Christian is privy to a unique access to God that is not available to other Christians.

Still, it is worth noting that the Old Testament priests had other functions in the community that are not shared today by every believer. They were teachers of the Law. They were judges who applied the Law to various circumstances of life. They were responsible for walking faithfully with God so that the people might catch a clearer vision of what God had called them all to be.

So, I ask again, for whom today is this message of Malachi intended? It must be addressed to church leaders but not to the extent that everyone else in the pew can tune out. A priest cares deeply about honoring God's name. Elders, preachers, teachers and others who influence our spiritual growth are easily targeted by this text, but the passion for honoring God's name is a passion shared by the whole community of Christ, by every member of His royal priesthood.

I. What God Desires *FROM* His People (1-3)

¹"And now this admonition is for you, O priests. ²If you do not listen, and if you do not set your heart to honor my name," says the LORD Almighty, "I will send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings. Yes, I have already cursed them, because you have not set your heart to honor me.

³"Because of you I will rebuke your descendants; I will spread on your faces the offal from your festival sacrifices, and you will be carried off with it.

A. A Whole-hearted Dedication to His Honor

Sometimes, we struggle with the whole notion of intense dedication. A commitment that comes and goes for many of us is to get in shape, but I read that when you drive around the gym parking lot for 10 minutes looking for the closest spot, perhaps the whole gym concept has eluded you.

In the previous chapter, Malachi reminded the people of just what a big deal it was that they were God's covenant people. Of all the other nations of the world, God chose Israel. Then He asked, "A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If I am a father, where is the honor due me? If I am a master, where is the respect due me?" says the LORD Almighty" (1:6). This special privilege of divine favor warranted a response of conspicuous love and gratitude. Instead, the people responded with tacky sacrifices of blind and unhealthy animals. The priests were dragging themselves through the motions of their duties even to the point of complaining, "What a burden!" The nation, led by the priests, was not giving God the honor and respect He was due.

Jesus was once asked which of Moses' commandments was the most important. He responded: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength" (Mark 12:30). Easily lost on the people as they endeavored to obey Moses was that all those regulations were just practical ways for expressing that YAHWEH meant more to them than anything in life. Whenever they missed that, even the most meticulous law-keepers veered off course. Legal observances became attempts to draw God's attention, to fill oneself with a sense of one's own righteousness or to exalt oneself above less competent observers of the Law. Law-keeping was no longer the simple outward expression of a heart filled with God.

"This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome. - 1 John 5:3

Love of God is the crux of joyful law-keeping. To a person that does not love God with all of his faculties, self-denial, obedience and love for others seems foreign. These things are hard and burdensome for they conflict with the natural tendency towards sin, self-gratification and self-will. But, when love of Christ compels us to shoulder His yoke, we find it gentle. Obeying God becomes our food and our delight. If the disciplines of the Christian life seem burdensome and unpleasant, I won't question your love of God if you won't question your need to love Him more. Malachi's issue with the priests was not that they failed to love God at all. He simply said, "you do not set your heart to honor my name." Their love was simply not whole-hearted.

B. A Covenant Mindset that He Can Bless

God covenanted with Israel that He would bless and protect them if they would honor His Law. Otherwise, He would not bless them. Now, do not misunderstand the message of Malachi. God was not looking for reasons not to bless His people. It was His heart's desire to bless them. In fact, He pleaded with them to honor Him in such a way that He could bless them, but they would not. He said, "I will curse your blessings." This could mean a couple of different things.

1) It could mean that God would reverse the benedictions the priests pronounced on the people.

²²The LORD said to Moses, ²³Tell Aaron and his sons, "This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them:

²⁴"The LORD bless you and keep you;

²⁵the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you;

²⁶the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace." ' - Numbers 6:22-26

This is a beautiful blessing, but again, it was premised on the obedience of the people. No doubt, the priests throughout Israel's history continued uttering such benedictions without regard to whether the nation was really honoring God. We have always preferred "claiming promises" to self-examination. But, God's integrity would have been at stake had He blessed the nation according to such benedictions when they were not setting their hearts on honoring His Name.

2) "I will curse your blessings" could refer to blight upon the land. The priests were supported by the tithes of the people. If God withdrew His hand of blessing from a people who were not determined to honor him, the priestly portion of the wealth of the land would be diminished.

Finally, if things did not change, God would strip the priests of their power and influence. The phrase "rebuke your descendants" can also mean "destroy your strength." Malachi describes a very public discrediting of the priests. "I will spread on your faces the offal from your festival sacrifices, and you will be carried off with it." "Offal" was the waste of a sacrificed animal, basically guts and excrement, which the Law required be scooped up and burned outside of the camp for it was permeated with defilement. Smearing offal on the priest's faces sounds like an episode of *Fear Factor*. Whether this was to be taken literally or as hyperbole for God's displeasure with the priests, it clearly meant that YAHWEH did not value half-hearted service.

II. What God Desires *FOR* His People (4-6)

A. Our Enjoyment of Life and Peace verses 4, 5

... ⁴And you will know that I have sent you this admonition so that my covenant with Levi may continue," says the LORD Almighty. ⁵"My covenant was with him, a covenant of life and peace, and I gave them to him; this called for reverence and he revered me and stood in awe of my name.

Levi was one of the sons of Jacob (or Israel), and the covenant of priesthood was made with the tribe that bore his name. Here, Malachi describes it as "a covenant of life and peace."

Through the agency of the priesthood, the blessings of life were made available to the Israelite people. These included abundance and prosperity, but also the ability to really enjoy these things. When true delight is found in God Himself, there is a foundation for truly enjoying the things He provides. On the contrary, when a man perceives that he has carved out his own niche in life, then no matter how abundant his possessions, he might either use them irresponsibly or fearfully cling to them. It is only the perspective that God is our Provider that can find a man able to balance full enjoyment of God's blessings with the joyful desire to give as much of them as he can away.

Biblical “peace” is much more than just a period of relative calm between seasons of conflict. God’s peace includes an assurance of our salvation. It includes a sense of closure about the past so that we no longer constantly war with ourselves. It empowers us to live at peace with others, at least to the extent we are in control of such relationships. It enables us to live lives of calm in a chaotic and often heart-breaking world because we know that the LORD Almighty is with us and for us.

The criterion for this “covenant of life and peace” was never perfect performance of the written Law. The priests of old were not perfect men, but they honored God’s name. They revered Him. They took the demands of their calling to heart, never losing sight of the spiritual truths pictured in the rituals. They loved God, but they did not inappropriately cozy up to Him as though there was no significant distinction between themselves and Him. They remembered He was holy.

B. Our Effectiveness in the Work of His Kingdom verse 6

⁶True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and turned many from sin.

The virtues described here were expected of a priest. God desired that a priest’s holy life and careful teaching would turn their countrymen from sin, and at many points in Israel’s history, a faithful priest would have such an impact, but not in the days of Malachi. How could they? The priesthood had led the nation into empty formalism, because they were not passionate about the honor of God’s name. What should that passion look like? Is it enough just to talk about it?

A certain “*Peanuts*” comic strip finds Linus listening as his sister Lucy boast about her religious faith and her potential as an evangelist. She says, “I could be a terrific evangelist. Do you know that kid who sits behind me in school? I convinced him that my religion is better than his religion.” Linus asks: “How did you do that?” Lucy replies: “I hit him with my lunch box.”

A more useful, albeit more understated approach is reflected in the response of an Amish man who was asked by an enthusiastic young evangelist if he had been saved and if he had accepted Jesus as his Lord. The man replied, “Why do you ask me such a thing? I could tell you anything. Here is the name of my banker, my grocer and my farm hands. Ask THEM if I am saved.”

III. What God Desires *THROUGH* His People (7-9)

A. Biblical Integrity verse 7

⁷For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, and from his mouth men should seek instruction – because he is the messenger of the LORD Almighty.

God’s priests are valuable conduits of good information which is often what people need most. A novice skydiver pulled his ripcord, but nothing happened. He pulled the backup cord. Still, nothing happened. As he hurtled toward the ground, he saw a man flying upwards toward him from below. Was this a guardian angel? “Do you know anything about parachutes?” he asked, as the man flew by. “No,” the man replied. “Do you know anything about gas stoves?”

The priests were the custodians of the Law. They were responsible for applying its principles. It was their role to examine people who had been ill to determine if a quarantine could be lifted or if a person could resume his normal place in the community. As cumbersome as the Law of Moses was, it was not exhaustive. An Israelite might be engaged in some gray-area behavior, and it was the priestly role to determine if some principle in the Law spoke to a situation. The priest was “the messenger of the LORD Almighty.” This was a form of Malachi’s name. Was Malachi a priest? Who can say? But, it does have the effect of communicating, “I should not have to be telling you this. Teach God’s Word soundly.

We all need biblical integrity, but the Christian teacher especially needs it, for there is no more manipulative creature on earth than a person in spiritual authority who knows the Bible, but who uses it only to buttress his own points of view or who exploits the hunger of others for God's Word to his own advantage. And, of course, incompetence is inexcusable. This is why James says: "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly" (James 3:1).

B. Practical Life Examples verse 8

... ⁸But you have turned from the way and by your teaching have caused many to stumble; you have violated the covenant with Levi," says the LORD Almighty.

Even if a priest dutifully carried out every detail of his work, an attitude of indifference towards God could not be lost on the people. If he was harsh and loveless, then his ritual of religion was misleading. People might get the impression that they could live as they pleased so long as they remembered to bring the proper sacrifices to the temple on the right occasions. A priest indifferent to God might reproduce his own sins in the lives of others; sins of hypocrisy, self-righteousness, self-delusion, religious presumption as well as harshness towards and exploitation of the weak. The national value of the priestly ministry could only remain intact if the lives of the priests were marked by purity, generosity, kindness and a fierce devotion to God.

C. Impartial Judgments verse 9

... ⁹"So I have caused you to be despised and humiliated before all the people, because you have not followed my ways but have shown partiality in matters of the law."

Humorist Dave Barry observes: "If a woman has to choose between catching a fly ball or saving an infant's life, she will choose to save the infant's life without even considering if there is a man on base." God desires pure judgments from us, but man is unduly governed by his circumstances.

The priests not only taught what the Law of God said, but they also functioned as judges to apply the Law when two Israelites were at odds. But, if devotion to God's Law of God did not drive a priest, something else would. Justice was for sale. The poor seldom stood a chance against a rich man in a legal matter, and God abhorred the unlevel playing field. He still does. He does not want us to severely view the sins of one man while we look away from or excuse those of close friends, relatives or the rich and powerful.

The great mistake of the priests in the days of Malachi was not idolatry or paganism. It was that their love for God had grown cold. Their decline was not overtly scandalous to human eyes, but it had stripped the beauty of "life and peace" from their priestly functions. Will you beware of anything that competes with your passion for God as He has been made known to us in Christ? You know that you must guard yourself against the allure of materialism, ambition, power and popularity. But know as well that the most subtle danger to your love of Jesus may be dutiful, tedious, responsible service to Him devoid of a real passion that His name be exalted in your life.