

Malachi: The Success of the Priests

Malachi 2:1-9 (part 2)

Preached by Rev. Craig T. Smith on January 28, 2024.

The Failure and Success of Teachers of the Word

This morning we spend a second week in the first nine verses of the second chapter of Malachi. Last week we took time to show that this text is relevant for today. We considered the truth from the book of Hebrews that there is no official priesthood in the church today. Christ has become our high priest. And all Christians are a kingdom of priests to God.

We also read that the duty of the priests at stake in this text is not sacrificing but teaching. Verse 7: "For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should desire instruction from his mouth, because he is the messenger of the LORD of Armies."

This is why the text matters today. This is why it continues to be relevant: it rebukes and exhorts those of us who are appointed to be the ministers of the Word for the people of God. The ministers of the Word can fail, or they can succeed. That's what this text is about. And that is why the text is so relevant. I invite you to turn or click open to Malachi 2:1-9. (read text)

Five Failures and God's Threatening Response

In verses 2, 8, and 9 God points out five failures of the priests. In verses 5-7, we see a description of what success in the ministry of the Word was supposed to look like. Last week, we never got into the terrible threats that God gives to these priests if they do not clean up their act.

We see the threats in verses 2, 3, and 9. As we consider these threats, it reminds us just how important God takes these matters. It also calls attention to the profoundly serious nature of the call to vocational pastoring. This is not something to be taken lightly. When God calls a man to preach, that calling carries serious spiritual weight, more so than any other position of leadership within the church.

The Bible teaches us in James that pastors and teachers will face a specific judgment of God on their sinful failures in teaching and preaching God's truths. James 3:1 teaches, "Not many should become teachers, my brothers, because you know that we will receive a stricter judgment." Every time I preach, every time I open the Scripture and teach, each sermon and

teaching will be laid out on the bench as I stand before the Judge on the last day. The words of Romans 2:21 will be read: "You then, who teach another, don't you teach yourself?" There are some pastors who are not to be envied at the judgment seat of Christ. Listen to the intensity now of God's anger in verses 2, 3, and 9. I'll read them together:

"If you don't listen, and if you don't take it to heart to honor my name," says the Lord of Armies, "I will send a curse among you, and I will curse your blessings. In fact, I have already begun to curse them because you are not taking it to heart. Look, I am going to rebuke your descendants, and I will spread animal waste over your faces, the waste from your festival sacrifices, and you will be taken away with it...So I in turn have made you despised and humiliated before all the people because you are not keeping my ways but are showing partiality in your instruction."

There are four terrifyingly ugly threats here:

1. First, (v. 2) God will curse them.
2. Second, God will turn their words which ought to be blessings into curses. This means that their teaching ministry is not something that truly does good – instead, it becomes a plague to God's people, distorting the truth.
3. Third, (v. 3) God will rebuke their offspring. The curse will extend far beyond their own lives.
4. Fourth, God will take the waste of those broken, lesser, mangy sacrifices and He will smear it on the priests' sanctimonious faces. Which means (according to v. 9) he will make them as despised and contemptible as possible among the people.

The Five Failures of the Priesthood

God is angry. The language used in Malachi 2 is not cool, unfeeling, or dispassionate. God has issues with disobedience. When you talk about rubbing excrement in somebody's face, that's angry. Imagine how terrifying that is, to have the beauty of God's holiness turn against you with omnipotent power. The holiness of God will, in this case, become the rage of God. Why was God so angry at these teachers of the law?

It was brought on by five failures in the priesthood. We focused on two of them last week.

1. Failure to Hear the Word of God

The first failure is found in verse 2: the failure of the minister of the Word to hear the voice of God. "If you will not listen . . ." This is a failure because you can't herald what you don't hear. The priests had stopped listening to God's voice.

2. Failure to Have a Heart for God's Glory

The second failure is the failure to have a heart for the glory of God. This is mentioned next in verse 2: "If you don't take it to heart to honor my name, says the LORD of Armies . . ." This is the heart of the matter. It is the essence of ministerial failure, and its opposite is the essence of ministerial success.

3. Turned from the Ways of God

The third failure of those who taught Israel was that they turned aside from the ways of God. Their lives fell short of the standards of the truth that they were supposed to teach and model. You see this in the first line of verse 8: "You, on the other hand, have turned aside from the way." And you see it in verse 9: "So I in turn have made you despised and humiliated before all the people because you are not keeping my ways..."

4. Showing Partiality in Teaching

The fourth failure is that the teachers showed partiality in their teaching. That's the last line of verse 9: "Because you are not keeping my ways but are showing partiality in your instruction." What does this mean? The priests were chasing the money. The priests were treating the Word of God the same way they were treating the sacrifices of God. The people were giving God the types of sacrifices that meant the people were left with the most money. The priests were giving the people the teaching that will bring in the most money. They were chasing the money by telling them things they wanted to hear, tickling their ears.

We call it preaching to the choir or playing to your audience. In this case, you are saying what Mr. and Mrs. Moneybags want to hear. You don't step on any toes. To put it the way Micah 3:11 puts it, "The heads of Jerusalem give judgment for a bribe, its priests teach for hire, its prophets divine for money." When the glory of God no longer satisfies the heart of a preacher, then he will seek his satisfaction elsewhere. They use the Word of God to get rich.

5. Causing Many to Stumble

This leads us to the fifth and final failure of the priesthood in Malachi's day, which is the result of all the other failures. It's in the middle of verse 8:

"You have caused many to stumble by your instruction."

Are the sins of teachers and leaders more grievous than the sins of others? Yes, they are. Not necessarily because the sin in and of itself is worse, but because its evil is compounded by the weight of the responsibility that should have restrained it in the first place. It is more grievous for the priests to sin than for the people to sin, because when the priests sin, they cause many to stumble. I have said this before, but it doesn't hurt to repeat it: Every heresy, every blasphemy that has ripped the church apart in its history began in a pulpit and not a pew. If you are blessed with a pastor who preaches sermons that are faithful to Scripture; a pastor that is traditionally, historically orthodox; a pastor who scrutinizes his teaching and preaching to root out any hint of heresy, than you need to consider yourself blessed. Nobody ever went astray because the pastor didn't wear a tie. But they did because he taught lies instead of truth.

Church Hurt is One of the Worst Hurts Around

Before we move on, let me acknowledge that some of you in here are victims of heretical failures from priestly or pastoral leadership. Many leaders in churches are plagued with partiality, greed, cowardice, worldliness, pettiness, and harshness, that some of you have wondered if the entire scope of Christendom isn't broken and have put up some walls between you and the ministry of the Word.

I remember as a little kid seeing this firsthand. I've only been to church maybe six times with my mom since I started kindergarten. The reason is because one Sunday, after my parents' divorce was finalized, I was holding my mom's hand as an associate pastor told her that there was no room in the church for a divorced woman. He said that. I struggled with that moment, and I bet others of you have struggled with your own moments. It was many, many years later when I found comfort in this text.

If you are here this morning and you have been hurt by priestly hypocrisy, God is telling you that He hates priestly hypocrisy ten thousand times more than you and I do.

And God intends some awful judgment for every pastor who forsakes His glory, departs from His ways, teaches for hire, and causes people to stumble. God has that mess handled and you can let it go and move on with healing and nurturing under someone who preaches and teaches God's truth responsibly and reliably.

This text designed this morning not only to warn me, the preacher, against failure, but also you to warn you, the people, against being the victim of that failure. God is saying this morning to some of you, "Don't let the hypocritical Christian leaders of your past drag you with them to destruction."

The Tree of a Successful Ministry of the Word

Malachi shifts here in verses 5-7 to focus on the glory of priestly success. It may be helpful for us to consider the successful ministry of the Word with the structure of a tree. It is deeply rooted, has a strong trunk, extends out with broad branches, and provides life-giving fruit. Each of these is in the text.

The root of good preaching is the covenant that God makes with the preacher. Look at verses 4 and 5: "Then you will know that I sent this decree, so that my covenant with Levi may continue," says the Lord of Armies. "My covenant with him was one of life and peace, and I gave these to him; it called for reverence, and he revered me and stood in awe of my name."

Levi was the son of Jacob from whom all the priests came, and this text tells us that there is a covenant between God and these ministers of the Word. The terms of the covenant go like this:

From God's side there comes

- the divine call to the office,
- the promise of life and peace,
- the initiative to give the life and peace necessary for their ministry.

From man's side the covenant requires that the preacher

- fear God,
- and stand in awe of his name.

THE ROOT

This is the root of all success in the ministry of the Word without of exception. Do you see the explicit contrast between the success of verse 5 and the failure of verse 2? In verse 2 the teachers "will not take to heart to honor my name, says the LORD of hosts." And in verse 5 the teachers "feared and stood in awe of my name." When the root is bad, everything will be bad.

A deep root has been planted for the ministry of the Word when a man stands in awe of His name and has a heart for His glory. There is absolutely no spiritual success without this root.

THE TRUNK

Next let's consider the trunk of this tree. What is the trunk of the ministry of the Word?

The trunk is a strong commitment to defend and proclaim the truth of God's Word. You can see this in two sentences, one in verse 6 and one in verse 7. Verse 6 says, "True instruction was in his mouth." Then verse 7 says, "The lips of a priest should guard knowledge [that's where we get the idea of defending the truth, protecting it from distortion and misuse]—and people should desire instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the LORD of Armies."

The last phrase is most important: the true minister of the Word has a Word from God; he is the messenger of the Lord. What makes the trunk of this tree of the ministry of the Word strong is that the Word is not man's word; it is God's. Unlike the failure of verse 2, the true minister of the Word listens to God. And unlike the failure of verse 9, the true minister of the Word refuses to adjust the message to show partiality to the rich and powerful. True instruction is found in his mouth, and he protects that knowledge from distortion and abuse.

So the root is reverence for the glory of God and the trunk is faithfulness to the Word of God.

THE BRANCHES

The branches of the ministry of the Word are the preacher's personal life of devotion to God and the preacher's private and public life of holiness to the Lord. There is no successful ministry of the Word without this.

Verse 6 states this plainly: "True instruction was in his mouth, and nothing wrong was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and integrity and turned many from iniquity." A minister of the Word simply must walk in communion with God. This is the opposite of the failure in verse 8: "You have turned aside from the way," and in the middle of verse 9: "You have not kept my ways."

The true minister of the Word walks with God. And as he walks with God, he stands upright for the truth. He is faithful in all his dealings. His lips are pure —no foul talk, no false talk, no malice. Just purity, grace, and truth—even if it hurts or offends.

So the root of the tree is reverence for the glory of God and the trunk is faithfulness to the Word of God. And the branches are faithfulness and holiness in the presence of God.

THE FRUIT

And the fruit is that many people are saved. The last phrase of verse 6: "He turned many from iniquity." We have seen the contrast between the success portrayed in verses 5–7 and the failures of the priests in Malachi's day. This last contrast may be the clearest of all. "He turned many from iniquity" is just the opposite of the second phrase in verse 8: "You have caused many to stumble by your instruction." The ministry of the Word can destroy, and the ministry of the Word can save.

When your ministry is rooted in the glory of God and your trunk is strong with the Word of God and your branches display the righteousness of God, then the fruit of your life is going to be the salvation of God for the sake of sinners.

Would you commit yourself to pray every day with me that the glory of God and the Word of God and the righteousness of God would so fill this church that people would turn away from sin, and receive the SALVATION OF GOD both here in this room and all over this city?