

## **Malachi: The Failure of the Priests**

*Malachi 2:1-9 (part 1)*

**Preached by Rev. Craig T. Smith on January 21, 2024.**

### **The Pastor Who Doesn't Hear**

Not too many years ago, I knew a pastor who had started a church and saw some initial growth within that church plant. The church's main focus was on social justice issues as well as a primary emphasis on the music style in the worship services.

A lot of emphasis was placed on that worship hour and eventually it grew. However, the pastor was not concerned with the biblical truth being preached and taught. In fact, not long into the church's life, he made the decision for his church that God's word was not inerrant, and it was not infallible. Meaning, error could creep into the text. It could contradict itself. If the pastor felt it didn't pertain to what he was talking about that Sunday, he didn't even open the Bible or use any of its teaching.

Fortunately, the Lord brought that church to a swift end. It was one of those instances in which no church was a better option. The pastor didn't seem concerned with the duties that his office required. He felt that those old truths about being a pastor didn't apply to him.

There is a timeless relevance on the biblical priesthood that transitioned from the Old Testament priesthood to the New Testament "priesthood of the believer." Malachi warns of the danger of not hearing God and not taking to heart his glory. The next two weeks we will be here in these nine verses. I invite you to Malachi 2:1-9. (read text)

### **Warning to the Priests**

Last week, we considered together the curse of careless worship. The people and the priests were being careless, offering cheap, half-hearted worship. This was not just a priestly problem. The people were choosing money of God, sacrificing lesser, broken, blemished animals while keeping good, healthy animals in the flock. The people were bringing God cheap leftover sacrifices, and the priests allowed it.

Malachi 2:1-9 focuses its attention to the priests. "This decree is for the priests." As we get deeper into this text, you may be wondering, as you are not a priest, what exactly this text may offer you.

So, before we dive much further into the text today, let's consider its relevance for us all. Is the priesthood of the Old Testament considered obsolete? Are there still priests today? If so, who are they? The New Testament never uses the term priest to describe a pastor or elder in the church leadership structure. There is no official priesthood in the New Testament church. Hebrews makes the reason clear: Jesus Christ himself has become our permanent priest, making the Old Testament priesthood obsolete now.

Hebrews 7:23-25: "Now many have become Levitical priests, since they are prevented by death from remaining in office. But because He remains forever, he holds his priesthood permanently. Therefore, he is able to save completely those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to intercede for them."

There were a lot of Old Testament priests because death meant an opening in the office. Christ, on the other hand, holds his office forever because He is eternal. This means that Jesus is able, for all time, to save anyone who would choose to draw near to God through faith in Christ. Jesus lives to make intercession for them.

Hebrews tells us that Jesus is now the only priest between God and us. His sacrifice was final, and His life is indestructible (Heb. 7:16).

Christ, as our High Priest, entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking his own blood and not the sacrificed blood of goats and calves. This meant we could experience eternal redemption through salvation (Heb. 9:11-12).

This means that the Old Testament priesthood was replaced once and for all by the priestly ministry of Jesus. Jesus did this by offering himself as the final sacrifice for sin and now intercedes for us in heaven. There is no official priesthood in the New Testament Church.

So, today when we emphasize the "priesthood" of the ministers and clergy, we minimize the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ. The truth is either lost or dismissed that there are no more sacrifices for sin. The death of Christ once for all is sufficient to forgive the sins of anyone who would ever believe. The priestly offering of sacrifice has ended. Christ ended it.

## **A Holy Priesthood**

Instead, the Apostle Peter refers to the entire church as a “holy priesthood” (1 Peter 2:5) and a “royal priesthood” (1 Peter 2:9). The Apostle John tells us that Christ made the whole Church a kingdom and made all Christians priests to his God and Father (Revelation 1:6). We call this doctrine the Priesthood of the Believer, and it means that Jesus made a way for all of us to come directly into the presence of God. We do not need any go-between or human mediator. We can walk with Christ – our High Priest – into the Holy of Holies, the presence of God, where God lives, and we find grace there when we need it (Heb. 4:16).

There is no official priesthood in the New Testament church. None of our church leaders are called priests. However, while the sacrificial duties of the priest have ended, there are other duties that the priests in the Old Testament had that are continued in the New Testament and still are today.

Malachi 2:7 reveals what those duties are. “For the lips of the priest should guard knowledge, and his people should desire instruction from his mouth, because he is the messenger of the Lord of Armies.” In the Old Testament, priests were teachers. This aspect of their ministry continued into the New Testament. Ephesians 4:11 says that Christ gave pastors and teachers to the church to equip the people for the work of the ministry of the gospel.

1 Timothy confirms that there are to be overseers who are able in teaching (3:2), and that some elders in the church are to labor in preaching and teaching (1 Tim. 5:17; Titus 1:9). This office is what we refer to as pastors. The words “pastor,” “elder,” and “overseer” are used to describe the same office. It is the office that I was called to in as a junior in high school in 1991. It is the office I trained for at college and got my bachelor’s degree in. It is the office that I began serving churches to fulfill in 1994 and over the past almost thirty years and in seven churches I labor in preaching and teaching.

This part of the priests’ duties in Israel continued in the elders of the New Testament church, even though they are never called priests. Pastors do not offer sacrifices for the forgiveness of sins. Instead, we point people to the finished, all-sufficient work of the cross and directly to the living, interceding Jesus Christ, by God’s Word.

Malachi 2:1-9 is relevant for us today because the priestly failure we read about concerns the preaching and teaching.

So, why should people who are not pastors care about the failures and successes of pastoral ministry?

1. Someday, this congregation will have to call another pastor to preach. Most churches are not prepared for this because they have not been taught to understand the biblical vision of the pastoral ministry.
2. You should be praying daily for the pastoral leadership of the church. But if you do not know what the Bible teaches about the purpose of pastoral ministry, you cannot pray with power and confidence.
3. You should hold your pastors accountable to fulfill the biblical vision of pastoral ministry. This is not inconsistent with having a submissive spirit toward the pastoral leadership of the church like Hebrews 13:17 commands. You cannot hold pastors accountable to their preaching ministry if you do not know what the biblical teaching of what that duty is.
4. It is encouraging to a pastor when the people respond to his ministry with understanding – when there is a deeply shared common vision of why a pastor does what he does. But that kind of deep, joyful responsiveness is simply impossible except where the people learn what the biblical vision of the pastoral calling is.

So I hope we have laid a foundation now for these next two weeks' messages – a foundation for why this text about Old Testament priests is relevant for pastors and non-pastors today.

### **The Failure of Doctrinal Abandonment**

There is a rash today, especially in the climate and culture we live in, of devastating, long-term doctrinal abandonment and defection. Pastors and churches are leaving the authority and sufficiency of the Scripture by the thousands. In Amos, God predicted what would ruin Israel, his people. He predicted a famine would destroy Israel. Not a normal famine, meaning a lack of food, but instead he meant the famine of the Word of God.

We see it almost weekly, pastors, church leaders, churches, and even entire denominations, leaving behind the truth of God's word to embrace a culture that desires compromise. And here in Malachi 2, that is the most devastating priestly failure that God is concerned with.

### **Failure vs Success**

In Malachi 2:1-9 we see a contrast between the failures of the priests in Malachi's day and the successes of the priests in Israel's early history. We see this in vvs. 2,8, and 9. Malachi mentions five failures and then describes the successful counterpoints in vvs. 5-7.

This morning, we will focus on the two deepest priestly failures mentioned in v. 2. Next Sunday, we will move into the rest of the passage and complete the picture of the true minister of the Word.

### **Priestly Failures**

There are two significant priestly failures listed here. First, the failure of the priests to listen to God, and the second, the failure to have a heart burden for the glory of God.

#### **1. Failure to Listen to God**

"If you don't listen . . . I will send a curse among you." In pastoral ministry, the great danger is that voice of God in Scripture might be drowned out by other voices. It is a terrifying possibility that one day we may wake up and read the Scripture and not hear anything from God.

Why would this be so awful? Because the last line of v. 7 says that the minister of the Word is "the messenger of the Lord of Armies." There is a difference between a lecture on the meaning of an ancient book and a message from the Lord of Armies. God has appointed preachers not to simply lead discussions or explain problems, or even analyze texts, but to herald a message to his people. You can't herald what you aren't hearing.

W. A. Criswell of First Baptist Dallas once quoted a man in his church. He said, "Pastor, we know what the editorialists say, and we know what the commentators say, and we know what the economists and politicians say. What we want to know from you is, DOES GOD HAVE ANYTHING TO SAY?!"

#### **2. Failure to Have a Burden for God's Glory**

The second priestly failure in verse 2 is the failure to have a heart burdened for the glory of God. "If you don't take it to heart to honor my name," says the Lord of Armies, "then I will send a curse among you."

The wording here matters. It is important. It is not just an issue of whether the glory of God is the main theme of the minister's doctrine and preaching, but whether the pastor is burdened in his heart to see God glorified.

Is God's glory not just a part of your theology, but the passion of your soul? So often, "glory to God" is a throwaway line that doesn't carry much meaning for people. Most Christians only sing it or think at Christmas when the account of the angels and the shepherds is read.

Does the glory of God come before the approval and praise of his people? Does the glory of God come before professional advancement? Does the glory of God come before financial gain and material comfort? The glory of God must become our inner compass's true north. The desire for God's glory and honor must be both a private desire as well as a public one.

I cannot think of a more crucial aspect in holding a pastor accountable than that he "take to heart" the glory of God. When was that ever the main expectation that a pastor was evaluated on? Does the pastor give glory to the name of God? Does the priesthood of the believer give glory to the name of God?

For many pastors and congregations, they are most comfortable giving glory to the manmade infrastructure of the church or the sign outside or the history of the organization. Do not settle for less than that in your own lives and certainly not in the pulpit.

Desire that kind of pastor, who loves the Word of God and the glory of his name.

Pray for that kind of pastor until you have that kind of pastor, to the glory of our great God and Savior.