

MBC – 6/7/2020 – Pastor Doug Thompson
“The Punishment of the Priests”
 Malachi 2:1-9

Turn with me in your Bibles to Malachi this morning – last book of the Old Testament – and the last word from God for 400 years until John the Baptist came as the forerunner for Jesus. We’re going to see that Malachi predicts the coming of both John the Baptist and Jesus. We’re looking at ch.2 this morning where God pronounces punishment on the priests for failing to honor Him in their worship. But this is a word to everyone of us this morning. Let’s read together—

- Malachi 2:1–9 ¹“And now, O priests, this command is for you. ²If you will not listen, if you will not take it to heart to give honor to my name, says the LORD of hosts, then I will send the curse upon you and I will curse your blessings. Indeed, I have already cursed them, because you do not lay it to heart. ³Behold, I will rebuke your offspring (seed), and spread dung on your faces, the dung of your offerings, and you shall be taken away with it. ⁴So shall you know that I have sent this command to you, that my covenant with Levi may stand, says the LORD of hosts. ⁵My covenant with him was one of life and peace, and I gave them to him. It was a covenant of fear, and he feared me. He stood in awe of my name. ⁶True instruction was in his mouth, and no wrong was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and he turned many from iniquity. ⁷For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts. ⁸But *you* have turned aside from the way. You have caused many to stumble by your instruction. You have corrupted the covenant of Levi, says the LORD of hosts, ⁹and so I make you despised and abased before all the people, inasmuch as you do not keep my ways but show partiality in your instruction.”

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Intro – What do priests and levites have to do with us today?

Last Sunday we saw how God hates lukewarm, insincere, perfunctory worship. It dishonors Him. It desecrates His holy name. He would rather people just stay home. He said that. The priests were the main ones guilty of this vain worship, but God was speaking to the people as well. The priests were bored. They complained about having to offer the sacrifices – it was wearisome. But it was the people who brought their blemished offerings and 3-legged sheep. God holds spiritual leaders *doubly* responsible when they mislead their flocks, but God holds the sheep responsible for following ungodly examples. God spoke this through Hosea—

- Hosea 4:9 ⁹‘And what the priests do, the people also do.’ So now I will punish both priests *and people* for their wicked deeds.

The question is: “How is any of this relevant to you and me, today, 2,400 years later?” That’s a good question and we need to answer it—

There is no priesthood today. When did the Levitical priesthood end? At the cross! The whole religion of Judaism pointed to Jesus: every priest, every sacrifice, every feast and festival, the Temple, the Sabbath, all *pictured* and *pointed* to Jesus Christ and was *fulfilled* in Jesus Christ. When He died as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world – it was finished. All the sins of all of God’s people throughout all of history were fully and finally atoned for. No more sacrifices means no more Temple, no more priesthood.

*And wherever you *do* find a church today with a priesthood, it is *unbiblical*. It has to be if it continues what Jesus Himself fulfilled! And that church is going to minimize the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ. Think of the **Roman Catholic Church** with its priesthood that puts men in between sinners and God, and offers up the mass as a real sacrifice of the real body and blood of Christ, over and over for the forgiveness of sins. That’s blasphemy. If they proclaimed the true Gospel, their priests would be out of business. And the Pope would repent for calling himself the “Vicar of Christ” (Christ’s representative here on earth, possessing all His authority!)

- Or think of the Mormon Church which has false-Apostles, false-Prophets, and a false priesthood. They minimize the sufficiency of Jesus death on the cross by adding works to faith for salvation. They are great people, I have friends who are Mormons, but their church is a cult.
- Anglicans have a priesthood. Now surely I’m not going to say that all Anglican churches are false churches? No, but I say, “Repent! Stop calling church leaders “priests” when Scripture doesn’t! It sends the wrong message. Be biblical for crying out loud!

Leadership in the church of Jesus Christ is *never* compared to the Levitical priesthood, because Jesus is our permanent High Priest who ever lives to make intercession for His people. For there is one mediator between man and God, the Man, Christ Jesus. We confess our sins directly to God and we know we have forgiveness because of the shed blood of Christ!

But this passage in Malachi is written to the Levitical priests, so back to our question, “How do we apply this passage? Two ways—

1.) In the New Covenant, all believers form a priesthood—

- 1 Peter 2:5 [we are to be] *a holy priesthood*, to offer *spiritual* sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (Spiritual sacrifices of praise and worship, of serving, doing good – and proclaiming the Gospel to unbelievers, out of *gratitude* for Christ’s finished work!)

- 1 Peter 2:9 . . . you are a chosen race, *a royal priesthood*, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, (and here is our priestly duty) that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.
- Revelation 1:6 [Jesus has] made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Beginning with Martin Luther, the Reformers taught the doctrine of the “priesthood of the believer,” meaning that every Christian has direct access to God through Jesus Christ. We don’t need any person to stand as our mediator. We can read God’s Word and it can speak to us personally. And – get this – as believer-priests we plead with the lost to come to Jesus for forgiveness. It’s an incredible privilege. And it’s a serious *responsibility*. And it’s a corporate responsibility – it’s our responsibility as a church.

So follow me here: when you and I hear God directing judgment on the priests of Israel, we should take it very personally: If God called those men to be holy, and faithful, to honor His name, and to offer up sincere, acceptable worship, how much more should we as new creatures in Christ, under a New Covenant inaugurated by His blood, take these words to heart? They strained to see a future fulfillment to all their sacrifices. We look back and see the fulfillment in Christ. We are a “*royal priesthood!*” We have no excuse for lukewarm worship—

- Hebrews 10:19–22 ¹⁹Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, ²¹and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²²let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

But there is a second application here—

2.) In the New Covenant, pastor/elders take the place of priests as leaders in the church.

They don’t *offer* sacrifices – they point people to the *finished* sacrifice of Christ. But elders and pastors (and you know it’s the same group of men), shepherd the flock: they lead, feed, love, and guide God’s people as the OT priests did. Let me read that passage from Hosea again—

- Hosea 4:9 ⁹‘And what the priests do, the people also do.’ So now I will punish both priests *and people* for their wicked deeds.

Beloved, I am *doubly* accountable before God for what He says here in Malachi. When I read this passage, believe me, I tremble. I pray constantly for God to search my heart for sin and hypocrisy and error. I hope you pray for me and your elders too. Please do that because your own spiritual health is at stake.

Well that was a long intro. Now let's look at—

I. God's punishment on the priests.

- ¹"And now, O priests, this *command* is for you.

The word "command" refers to the *punishment* God is going to execute on the priests in Malachi's day for their dereliction of duty. He has ordained it, and it will happen at His *command* unless they listen and take to heart to do what? V.2, "**Give honor to My name.**" Wasn't this the whole point of last week's passage? God is a great King, whose name will be feared among the nations! He was a Father to His people, and a Master over them, caring for them, guiding them, providing for them – but they were ungrateful children and disobedient servants. They dishonored Him with their blemished sacrifices and perfunctory worship. And God hated it

- Malachi 1:10 ¹⁰Oh that there were one among you who would shut the doors, that you might not kindle fire on my altar in vain! I have no pleasure in you, says the LORD of hosts, and I will not accept an offering from your hand.

"Pull the plug, and stop the show," God says. He is ready to *curse* them – His own priests – and He has already begun—

- Malachi 2:2–3 ²If you will not listen, if you will not take it to heart to give honor to my name, says the LORD of hosts, then I will send the curse upon you and I will curse your blessings. (I.e., everything God had given to bless them, would be turned into a curse on them). Indeed, I have already cursed them (it's already started), because you do not lay it to heart. ³Behold, I will rebuke your offspring, (the word is 'seed' and it's probably referring to a curse on the crops of the people, which would directly affect the priests because that was part of their compensation. And this next part is shocking:) and [I will] spread *dung* on your faces, the *dung* of your offerings, and you shall be taken away with it.

Do you think God is upset? "You dishonor My name, and pollute My worship? I will pollute you." When the priests offered up animal sacrifices, they took the entrails (guts), and the intestines and excrement *outside the camp* to be burned. But they have offended God so grievously that He will figuratively smear their own faces with this excrement and throw them outside the camp along with it. And it's all for this purpose—

- Malachi 2:9 ⁹and so I make you despised and abased before all the people, inasmuch as you do not keep my ways . . ."

Isn't it shocking to hear God talk this way? We *should* be shocked. The priests loved their reputation and their power and sway over the people. So God would expose them and humiliate

them in front of the people for their sins. Matthew Henry said that “Nothing profanes the name of God more than the misconduct of those whose business it is to do honor to it.” And that was the #1 calling of Israel’s priests – to honor to God’s name. They failed in the “upward” focus.

But even in this word of judgment God is calling these priests back – He wants to purify the priesthood and bring them back to their covenant relationship with Him—

I. High privilege, high calling.

- Malachi 2:4 ⁴So shall you know that I have sent this command to you, that my covenant with Levi may stand, says the LORD of hosts.

God speaks of Levi here to stand for the priesthood, even though Levi was about 1,000 years before Malachi’s time. So let me remind you that Levi was one of the 12 sons of Jacob, and God set aside the Levites (in lieu of the firstborn of the Jews) for His special service. They had no inheritance in the Promised Land because God was their inheritance. Then God selected one of Levites descendants, Aaron, to be Israel’s first High Priest, and Aaron’s sons to be the priesthood of Israel. So the priests were a subset within the Levites. Not all Levites were priests, but all priests were Levites.

The priests were responsible for offering sacrifices and sprinkling the blood, and their brothers, the Levites, were basically their helpers. In vv.4-7, God calls the priests back to His original covenant with them which involved God’s side and their side. God’s side was to grant the priests life and peace—

- Malachi 2:5 ⁵My covenant with him was one of life and peace, and I gave them to him.

God promised to bless and care for His priests, and He did so. When they obeyed and served God with integrity, they never lacked. And that was meant to display to the people of Israel that when His people obey Him, He will bless them with *life and peace*. This is the whole message of the Book of Deuteronomy! And this was their side of the covenant—

- (v.5) It was a covenant of fear, and he feared me. He stood in awe of my name.

The priests’ #1 job was to honor God’s name, to fear Him, stand in awe of Him, and call His people to do the same. The #1 job of the spiritual leaders of Israel was to focus on the vertical – the *upward*. That’s still job #1 for the shepherds of Christ’s flock – to keep the church God-centered, God-focused, amen? And our #1 prayer request is always: “*Our Father who is heaven, hallowed be Your name!*”

- Oh, we all have to fight for this, don’t we? It’s so easy to drift into self-centered worship: “Did the singing move me and make me feel emotional?” Instead of asking, “Did I direct all that is in me to honor and glorify God?” We ask, “Was the sermon interesting, did I

learn anything new?” Instead of asking, “Did I hear this for what it really is, the Word of God, and am I committed to obeying it and applying it to the glory of God?” Everything in the worship service should be offered up to God.

And the other main responsibility God gave them was in—

- Malachi 2:6–7 ⁶True instruction was in his mouth, and no wrong was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and he turned many from iniquity. ⁷For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts.

God’s priests were to *teach the people His Word*. All of it, accurately, and then live out what they taught with integrity. Teach it and model it. And then call the people to follow *their* example in repenting of their sins and obey God’s Word. Isn’t that just what the ministry is all about? It takes in the vertical and the horizontal.

- God’s priests were to be reliable sources of truth for His people: *“People should seek instruction from his mouth.”* They were to be God’s resource for wisdom and instruction, and wise counsel. And there was to be no question that when they spoke, they were speaking as a *“messenger of the Lord of hosts!”*

The person who would teach God’s Word should have consecrated lips: *“for the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth.”*

- Psalm 141:3 ³Set a watch, O LORD, before my mouth; Keep the door of my lips.
- Years ago when I worked as a counselor for John MacArthur’s radio ministry, I must have said something that was undignified, or inappropriate and my secretary at the time, walked into my office and she didn’t say anything, she just had her wristwatch over her mouth – turned and walked out! I got it: “set a watch O Lord before my mouth, keep the door of my lips!”

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers. It is a holy responsibility. But Israel’s priests were guilty of—

III. Clergy malpractice.

V.8 says that they “caused many to stumble by their instruction,” for two reasons—

A. How they “caused many to stumble”—

1.) Their teaching was tainted with partiality.

“partiality in your instruction” – v.9

They were man-pleasers. They didn’t want to offend anyone – who does? So they didn’t preach the hard stuff – the Scriptures that went like a heat-seeking missile to the heart. Their messages were lobbing spiritual softballs, just like the priests in Jeremiah’s day—

- Jeremiah 6:14 ¹⁴“They have healed the brokenness of My people superficially, Saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ But there is no peace.
- Jeremiah 23:17 ¹⁷They say continually to those who despise the word of the LORD, ‘It shall be well with you’; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, ‘No disaster shall come upon you.’” No, you can still have your best life now!

Just like so many preachers today. And these priests certainly didn’t want to offend those who were the big givers – so they made sure they didn’t bring up their particular sins. We can see what they were in this same book: adultery, and divorce. And they weren’t preaching against marrying foreign wives – because they were doing too, even though it was clearly forbidden in God’s Law. So they didn’t preach on that. Had to keep the money coming in.

I need to give you a spoiler alert: the people didn’t listen to Malachi either. Just a few years after Malachi gave this prophecy, Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem, and nothing had changed, and he was furious – especially over this sin of marrying foreigners. Let me read you how this man of God handled this sin—

- Nehemiah 13:23–25 ²³In those days also I saw the Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. ²⁴And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and they could not speak the language of Judah, but only the language of each people. ²⁵And I confronted them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair. And I made them take an oath in the name of God, saying, “You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves.

Uh, *whoa*. But this was a direct result of the priests’ shoddy, teaching. They cut corners. They didn’t give the people the whole counsel of God—

- Malachi 2:7 ⁷For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts.

And the way the priests “caused many to stumble” was because—

2.) Their lives were marred with hypocrisy.

God says of Levi in—

- Malachi 2:6 ⁶True instruction was in his mouth, and no wrong was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, (and this was the effect) and he turned many from iniquity.

He walked the walk, he practiced what he preached, so when he preached against sin, people listened – *he turned many from iniquity*. But God says to these sons of Levi—

- Malachi 2:8 ⁸But you have turned aside from the way. (and this was the effect) You have caused many to stumble by your instruction. (Why? Because it didn't match what they saw in their lives.) You have corrupted the covenant of Levi, says the LORD of hosts,

A teacher of God's Word should never contradict that Word by his life. This is why James warns would-be teachers and preachers—

- James 3:1 ¹Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

I don't believe the judgment here has to do with correctness of doctrinal as much as it has to do with integrity of life. Teachers will be strictly judged by whether their lives match their teachings. I carry these words on my shoulders like a pallet of bricks. If my life doesn't synch with what I teach, I'm a hypocrite, and hypocrisy in the teacher produces hypocrisy in the listener. And it spreads like leaven – didn't Jesus say that?

And when that hypocrisy is exposed in a preacher or teacher, it taints everything the man has ever said: not just what he might teach from that point on, but everything he has ever taught is suspect, right? Because trust has been shattered. There is a passage in Proverbs that is so powerful. Listen to this metaphor—

- Proverbs 25:26 ²⁶Like a muddied spring or a polluted fountain is a righteous man who gives way before the wicked.

It's like this: You know of a spring that has always had crystal clean water. You could go there and be refreshed, but one day you see that some cows have found that spring, it's trampled and muddy, there's manure in it. Are you ever going to go back there?

- I had a pastor friend who was an amazing preacher, he spoke before crowds of thousands of pastors. He wrote a book on preaching that I assigned to all my seminary students. I had downloaded dozens of his sermons. About 2 years ago he was exposed as an adulterer – with more than one woman. I won't be recommending his book anymore, and I deleted all of his sermons. Because he's like a muddied spring – I just can't trust what he has said.

About 460 years later, Paul said this about the Jewish teachers of his day. They were still hypocrites—

- Romans 2:17–24 ¹⁷But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God ¹⁸and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law; ¹⁹and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, ²⁰an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth— ²¹you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? ²²You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? ²³You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. (And here is Paul's point, this is the effect of their hypocrisy in unbelievers:) ²⁴For, as it is written, "*The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.*"

Horrible. And it all goes back to—

B. Their two deep priestly failures—

1.) Failure to listen to God.

"*If you will not listen.*" They had stopped listening to the Word of God. I'm sure they took His teaching in through their eyes – but had stopped seeing. And they took it in through their ears – but had stopped listening.

- The question is not just, are you reading your Bible, are you hearing His Word? The question is: are you receiving what you hear and read? Letting God's Word search your heart? Judge your motives? Convict you of sin? Does the Word of God lead you to confess your sins and repent? If that's not happening, then you have stopped listening to God! And beloved, you are in spiritual danger.

*Let me ask you this: after a Sunday service, when you have worshiped and sang, and heard God's Word preached – *what do you do about what you have heard?* When we all fellowship afterwards, then maybe go out to lunch, then finally head home – *has anything changed because of the Word you heard?*

Please think about this. It's a serious question. James said that if you hear the Word, understand what it requires of you, but do nothing about it – it would be like getting up this morning, looking in the mirror and seeing the serious work required – but then getting in your car and coming to church just as you are! Scary thought, right? You'd better wear a mask!

- But James said if you are a hearer but not a doer of what you hear, you are self-deceived. Beloved, that's where hypocrisy starts. Do what God's Word says. Apply it to

yourself, not others. God is not mocked, whatever a person sows, this he/she will also reap!

And especially this is a word to all who would preach or teach God's Word – are you listening? If you are a teacher, a handler of God's Word, even if it's a Bible study – you are a messenger of the Lord of hosts. Have you heard and applied His Word to your own life before you would teach others? You cannot herald what you have not heard!

2.) Failure to have a burden for God's Name.

"If you will not take it to heart to give honor to My name. . . indeed you do not lay it to heart." These priests did all the right religious stuff, but God saw their hearts: "Does the glory of My name weigh on your hearts? Do you have a deep, burning burden for My glory?"

Isn't this what we should look for in our shepherds, our pastors and elders? Does this man fear God? Can you see in his life, his home and family, a man who has a deep reverence for God? I know a church that chose their pastor mostly because he had his doctorate in Hebrew – that didn't work so well.

- And beloved, as believer-priests of the Lord Jesus Christ, do you radiate a burden for God's glory? Do we as a church? The words of Paul should burn in our hearts when an unbeliever visits us on a Sunday morning, that – *"falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you!"*

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IV. We need a true Priest.

Well what do we take away from a passage like this? We're all failed priests, right? I read this and wonder if I'm about to get a faceful of dung! But anytime we read a warning in Scripture, beloved, it's mercy. Because if we can still read it, and hear it, it's an invitation from God to repent and find mercy and grace to help in time of need.

And the help He gives us is a True Priest, the Lord Jesus, our High Priest. He faithfully fears and honors the Name of His Father; He teaches us God's Word perfectly, with zero partiality – then we can read the Gospels and see how He lived what He taught – perfectly. Jesus is the Messenger of the Lord, who is the Lord.

He offered Himself as the perfect, final sacrifice for our sins; He took our punishment and our curse on Himself. And He did that by being crucified *"outside the camp,"* publicly executed like a criminal. But the grave couldn't keep Him. He rose as the death-conqueror and the life-giver. And He raised up all believers with Him.

Now He ever lives to intercede for us before the throne of God above; and He rules and reigns over His church as our great King. If God's Word has convicted you this morning of failing to measure up to what He requires of His believer-priests, then His Spirit is working in your life! And the Spirit would bring you to our Great High Priest. Drink in these words—

- Hebrews 4:15–16 ¹⁵For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

And if you don't know Him, turn from your sins and come to Him. Do it this morning! He will save you, amen? And the proof of His saving power is sitting all around you.