

Text: Malachi 2:1-9 (version 3)

Title: Priests Called to Repent

Truth: God requires His people to honor His name.

Date/Location: Sunday April 28 and May 5, 2019 at FBC

Introduction

Malachi, situated at the very end of the *Old Testament*, is structured around six messages or disputations that God has with the nation of Israel. In them, God rebukes the pathetic condition of the nation. This is similar to what we see in the book that ends the *New Testament*, Revelation, where the Lord rebukes seven churches for their serious problems.

Let's read the text, suggest how it might be applied, and then go through carefully and see if our applications hold up to the study of the text. Normally we leave application until last, but I thought I would try to bring it forward in this message, and then we can evaluate its accuracy as we go through the text. Since I've preached this passage a number of times, what I did was to bring all the "distributed" applications forward from earlier editions of these sermon notes and collect them at the front end of the sermon. So don't worry that I'm "eisegeting" all this!

I. Application

We cannot put ourselves exactly in the shoes of the audience, the Israelite priests, because we are not offering animal sacrifices at various religious feasts. Also we are not parties to a "covenant with Levi." However, we can draw some important principles and derive some helpful applications.

- A. The function of priests then is somewhat similar to the role of pastors now (see verse 7). Their influence is akin as well (see 8b). The godly reverence required from them is similar too (verses 2, 5).
 1. The Word of God must be spoken regularly, clearly, and boldly. The mouth of the pastor should be full of the knowledge of the Word, and people should be able to get the Word of God from the pastor and other teachers of the church. Without this, for example, there will be no revival. There will be no healthy churches. There will be no healthy marriages or families, personal relationships, etc.
 2. Like the priests had a prototype and set of instructions, pastors do too. For example, see 2 Timothy 4:2, 1 Timothy 3, Titus 1, Acts 20.

3. If you are a pastor or Bible teacher listening to this message, take heed to the ministry which has been delivered to you. James tells us (James 3:1) that teachers will receive a more strict judgment. We have a large impact upon many people due to our elevated and responsible position as teachers.

B. Priests then have parallels to the role of believer-priests today.

1. Consider the following that show the Christian's priestly role: 1 Peter 2:5, 9; Revelation 1:6, 5:10, 20:6. Theologically, each believer has direct access to God through Christ. Every Christian can pray. Every Christian has had their sins permanently forgiven and is adopted into the family of God. Every believer has the Spirit of God. Many of these benefits are better than what the Jewish high priest had. Plainly, if you are a Christian, you are a priest, and you have responsibilities much like these priests that we are reading about here.

2. Then consider how we can impact those around us with our speech, for example. In speaking the truth of God's word, you may turn someone from sin. Righteous speech and life can have such an impact today. The application of God's word to our "walk and talk" will often do wonderful work on those around us. I would also add that as we think about this text for New Testament believers, we should consider our mouths and what kinds of things are often heard from them—is it truth and righteousness, or other things? We must strive to speak things that are true and righteous.

C. The warning against disobedience to God's commands is another timeless principle to recognize in Scripture. God has a rebuke for all who are unfaithful to Him. His warning consists of the charges (1:6-14) and the call to repentance (2:2, "take it to heart").

1. Faithfulness in the first place, of course, would prevent us from getting into situations where we need to repent.

2. But once a declension into sin has occurred, faithfulness *does* include repentance, as repentance is the faithful response of the person to the demands of God's Word. Therefore, God's overall requirement of faithfulness in His messengers boils down to faithfulness to repent when wrong is discovered in one's life. The requirements of God's word are applied and followed. The requirements are not mysterious.

D. Another sound principle derived from this Scriptures is that unfaithfulness leads to God's chastening for corrective purposes. In Heb. 12:7, 11 God deals with us as with sons—in order to bring about

righteousness. Consider how Malachi 2 relates to you and your faithfulness to God. Examine yourself in that light. Know that God does not send corrective measures just for fun, but that He does so “to maintain the covenant with Levi” (2:4). He wants to keep you in a proper standing in the Christian faith.

II. God Calls for Repentance by the Priests, v. 1-4

- A. Repentance consists of truly hearing and taking to heart what God says (vv. 1-2a). God had laid out some serious charges in 1:6-14 and 2:8. He expects the priests to pay heed. Notice that the word “commandment” is used in many translations of verse 1 – God commands a change of heart with respect to these abominable things.
- B. Lack of repentance will result in God’s curse (vv. 2b-3). There is a lot of background to be explained in these two verses. You see the reference to a) “blessings” which will be cursed, b) the rebuke of the Levites’ descendants, c) the spreading of offal on the priests’ faces, and d) the casting out of the priests. What does all of this mean?

Basically all of this relates back to the Mosaic covenant given in the Pentateuch, particularly in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. In it, blessings are established for obedience, and curses for disobedience. Consider some of them Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28.

- C. Curses from God if the Priests Don’t Obey. Note verse 2: if the priests will not take the call to repentance to heart, then God will curse them. How?
1. Curse on the priestly blessings (2b). These blessings could be the priestly income (which probably was reduced with the reduction in tithing, 3:8). The blessings could also relate to their standing in the community (and they were despised by the people, 2:9). I take it that this refers to a third kind of blessing—that which the priests pronounced on the people (Num. 6:22-27 and Deut. 10:8). All of this is to say that the Levites were intermediaries of God’s blessing to the nation. If the priests were not functioning properly, the whole nation would come into a drought of God’s blessings because their connection to God was attenuated.¹ I conclude that the blessings to which Malachi refers are given by God, through the Levites, and those blessings will be reduced to nothing when God punishes them for their infidelity.

¹ See Lev 9:22-23 and 2 Chron 30:27 for additional examples of priestly blessing on the people of Israel. The idea of blessings and curses in the law was common to the Israelite (Josh 8:34).

2. God will also rebuke the descendants of the priests (3a). This could mean that he will “cut them off” in the sense of kill them, or reduce the priests’ fertility so that they don’t have many children. But I think a better understanding is that God will terminate the Levitical system and thus the priests’ children will lose their wonderful heritage.

As for the sins of the fathers not being cause for punishment on the children, that principle is true. Yet, sins of parents can have consequences that cross generations, and influence their children to disobey God like the parents.

3. The third curse is the “dung curse” of verse 3b. This curse is graphic and repulsive. The dung, or “offal” as it is called, is the contents of the stomach or intestines of the sacrificial animal. This was part of the sacrificed animal that was not offered on the altar but was taken outside of the camp and burned, along with the skin, head, and various other body parts (Exod 29:14, Lev 4:11-12, 8:17, 16:27, Num 19:5). The offal was from the “festival sacrifices.” Figuratively speaking, the offal of their many sacrifices will be spread on their faces, and they will, with the other waste from the sacrifice, be carried outside of the camp and burned. Ultimately this curse means that the priests will be removed from their office, permanently unclean and unfit for service. As with the previous two curses, this curse can also be tied back to the Mosaic Law, particularly Leviticus 26:19 and several verses in Deuteronomy 28.

D. The main point of this paragraph is that the priests must turn from their sin, or face the punitive and corrective judgment of God for their indiscretions. This is made plain in the phrase “to give glory to my name.” The priests were told to listen and, with heartfelt consideration of their actions, turn from those actions. The phrase is reminiscent of Joshua’s words to Achan after the sin at Jericho, “give glory to the LORD God of Israel, and make confession unto him” (Joshua 7:19). The point was that Achan should tell the truth and confess his sin before God, which he did (7:20). It is true that God desires “honor” in a general sense (Mal 1:6), but more specifically he desires honor in repentant obedience, not just in words. This is important for us today. We MUST hear God’s word and take it to heart. Mere hearing is useless (James 1:22-25).

E. The goal of God’s rebuke and curse is that the covenant with Levi may continue. It is corrective, not merely punitive. In this passage, *Levites* and *priests* are used basically interchangeably, notwithstanding the

distinction that is present in other OT passages. The covenant is the subject of the next paragraph (5-7).

III. God Rebukes the Priests for Their Effect on Others, v. 8-9

- A. Priestly unfaithfulness does not stop with the priests; it deeply impacts the people. “You have departed...you have caused many to stumble.” As the leaders, so the people. Because of this level of influence, the priests will receive a stricter judgment (James 3:1). But their actions also deeply affect others.
- B. The priests of Malachi’s day were doing just the opposite of the revelation and prototype (which we will see in the notes on 2:5-7).
 - 1. They did not walk with God; instead they departed from the way.
 - 2. They did not turn many from sin; instead they caused many to stumble away from the Law.
 - 3. They did not faithfully teach as God’s messenger; instead they corrupted the covenant and showed partiality in judgment.These sins could have taken a number of different forms—perhaps in attitude, bribery, lack of interest in learning the law and how to effectively teach it, giving bad counsel to the people, etc. The sum of the whole accusation is that the priests “spoiled the covenant of Levi.”
- C. How far the spiritual leadership of Israel had fallen from the very early days! Little by little it degraded until the latter-day priesthood had almost no similarity to the Biblical model.
- D. The text tells us that God allowed the priesthood to fall into disrepute among the people. People can smell hypocrisy a mile away even if they are not theologically educated. They had no respect for these no-good priests. More pointedly, we could say that they hated the low-life priests. They could see right through them. Perhaps they considered them leeches.
- E. Many stumbled, that is, they fell from the law. They did not follow God’s ways because they had no teacher and no model, and in fact they had a negative model.
- F. Partiality in the law is a problem that is ever present. Special treatment for “special people” is a problem that we see down to our own day. The law is best if it is blind, not knowing anything about a person’s station, fame, beauty, or wealth. The priests also served as arbitrators/judges in

Israel, so they had a role that opened them up for bribery and favor-seeking that would be potential motivations for partiality.

IV. God Provides Instruction About the Priests' Responsibility, v. 5-7

- A. The instruction is found in the so-called “covenant with Levi” (v. 5). There is debate as to what this particular covenant describes. It is not explicitly mentioned in the Mosaic code. But we know that the idea of the priestly covenant was well understood at this time in the history of Israel:
1. Neh. 13:29-30 mentions the covenant of the priesthood and Levites.
 2. Jeremiah 33:21-22 mentions the same in the context of the unbreakability of the covenants with David and Levi.
 3. Deut. 33:8-11. I believe this is ultimately the basis of the covenant with Levi. Specifically, the Levitical covenant is the portion of the Mosaic covenant that is relevant to the Levitical line of priests. It is tied with the Mosaic covenant blessings and curses, yet has its own particular stipulations. Besides keeping the Law like any Jew should have done (obviously), their responsibilities are the teaching ministry and the altar ministry. Moses prays a blessing on Levi for carrying out this work, and protection from enemies.
 4. The entire chapter of Numbers 3 gives more responsibilities to them.
 5. Numbers 18:7-8 expresses that the priestly service and its provision is a *gift* from God—not a wearisome contemptible thing! It was a provision (portion) for Aaron and his sons.
 6. Numbers 18:19 mentions the covenant of salt. This phrase is used in Lev. 2:13 (salt required by the covenant stipulations given by God) and 2 Chronicles 13:5 (having to do with the permanency of the Davidic covenant, because salt is a *preservative*). It is this latter usage that seems to be the case with Numbers 18:19—suggesting permanency of the covenant with Levi. In this connection, note 18:8's word *forever*.
 7. See also Exodus 32:26-29.
- B. The history behind the Levite priesthood starts in Exodus 12 when the firstborn of Israel are set apart for the Lord since they were spared in the great plague on Egypt. After this, in Numbers 3, Moses was instructed to take the tribe of Levites in place of all the firstborn of Israel. Immediately thereafter, the LORD assigns duties to the Levites (Numbers 4).
- C. The covenant with Levi consists of the contents of these instructions, the duties which the Levites were to perform. As a subset of the Mosaic

system, the curses for disobedience and blessings for obedience applied here as well and are thus also part of the Levitical covenant.

- D. As one commentator says, “God’s relationship to the priest [was] a bilateral agreement involving mutual responsibility. God promised the priests ‘life and peace’ in exchange for reverence and devotion (v. 5).” (Chisholm, *Interpreting the Minor Prophets*, p. 283). We can glean this from the other texts (above), but it is explicitly taught right here in Malachi. They should have been able to at least extrapolate that information from what they had been given throughout their history.
1. Life and peace are elsewhere said to be results of obedience to the Mosaic Law (Prov. 3:1-2). *We are not under the law and so cannot expect automatic, immediate remuneration for good works.*
 2. The covenant required the devotion of the priests to God in order for them to obtain ‘life and peace.’
 3. Vibrant well-being was available through faithful obedience to the Mosaic law, and the Levitical covenant. Today, really vibrant life comes through a reverent relationship to God.
- E. It is important to note that one prominent element of this covenant with Levi was the **teaching** aspect of it. It is featured throughout Israelite history, from Deut. 33 to 2 Chronicles. It is interesting to see that during the revival periods under Asa, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, and after the return from the exile under Ezra and Nehemiah, the teaching function of the priests is specifically mentioned as being operative. In Josiah’s day it could hardly be different—the Word of God was rediscovered and this caused a great change in events in the history of the nation. See particularly Ezra 7:10. Ezekiel 44:15, 23 demonstrate this teaching function in the millennial kingdom. That is interesting, in that we might think of the millennial kingdom as a time when there won’t be teaching (Jeremiah 31:34), but there in fact is teaching on certain subjects. There has to be—for there will be people born who need to know how to conduct themselves aright in the temple, etc.
- F. Note that the teaching function is necessary in a world where God’s revelation was given at a particular time and place to a particular audience. The nature of revelation is “one time only.” For people who exist in other times, places, and audiences, teaching must be done to replicate that revelation, since it is not going to be given directly from the heavenly source again. Your teaching ministry from the Word of God is **VERY IMPORTANT!**

G. This earlier revelation is coupled with a prototype priest who models the proper relation of the messenger to God and His law (v. 6). While this covenant with Levi was faithfully observed at various points in Israel's history, it had fallen on hard times during Malachi's day. But the priests could easily go back in the book and see what they were supposed to do.

The speech and the life of the godly priest matched the Word and supported one another, as they should for any "messenger" of God. The priest had the truth of God permeate his soul so much that it radiated from whatever he spoke and was demonstrated in his life. This led to an important result—the priest turned many people away from iniquity. He had such a forceful impact upon the people among whom he ministered that there were outstanding results.

H. This revelation shows how any messenger of God should instruct God's people (v. 7), and this includes us today. The priest should have a store of Biblical knowledge. This knowledge should expand into true wisdom so that when people seek counsel, they receive wisdom. The priest should have been a reliable "go to guy" for the populace to obtain help in time of perplexity about what to do to please God. Why? Because that is his job, if you will; it is his calling. He is the messenger of the LORD of hosts.

Conclusion

God requires His people to honor His name. For leaders, this is especially critical. When spiritual leaders stray, they must repent and come back to the Biblical revelation that is their job description.

For Christians who in fact are priests, this is also required. We must not do damage to the name and honor of God by sloppy, sinful living. To do so affects other people, and God is well justified to rebuke us in such a case.

Furthermore, there are still temporal consequences of sin, which should deter us from wandering away from faithfulness to God. Strange how even a strong promise of punishment could not keep the priests on the right track. But let us not think ourselves above them—our own depravity would drive us to the same ends were it not for the work of God in our lives.

Far from being a 2,500 year-old, irrelevant message, this text hits home today with its timeless truths and applications. Lord, thank you for recording it for our learning.

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