

March 29
Lesson 5 (KJV)

Need for Just Leaders

Devotional Reading: Psalm 50:1–15
Background Scripture: Malachi 2; 3
Malachi 2:1–9

1. And now, O ye priests, this commandment is for you.
2. If ye will not hear, and if ye will not lay it to heart, to give glory unto my name, saith the Lord of hosts, I will even send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings: yea, I have cursed them already, because ye do not lay it to heart.
3. Behold, I will corrupt your seed, and spread dung upon your faces, even the dung of your solemn feasts; and one shall take you away with it.
4. And ye shall know that I have sent this commandment unto you, that my covenant might be with Levi, saith the Lord of hosts.
5. My covenant was with him of life and peace; and I gave them to him for the fear wherewith he feared me, and was afraid before my name.
6. The law of truth was in his mouth, and iniquity was not found in his lips: he walked with me in peace and equity, and did turn many away from iniquity.
7. For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth: for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts.
8. But ye are departed out of the way; ye have caused many to stumble at the law; ye have corrupted the covenant of Levi, saith the Lord of hosts.
9. Therefore have I also made you contemptible and base before all the people, according as ye have not kept my ways, but have been partial in the law.
Malachi 3:5, 6
5. And I will come near to you to judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, and against the adulterers, and against false swearers, and against those that oppress the hireling in his wages, the widow, and the fatherless, and that turn aside the stranger from his right, and fear not me, saith the Lord of hosts.
6. For I am the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.

Key Verse

If ye will not hear, and if ye will not lay it to heart, to give glory unto my name, saith the Lord of hosts, I will even send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings: yea, I have cursed them already, because ye do not lay it to heart.—Malachi 2:2

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Describe the conduct of the Judean priesthood of the late fifth century BC.
2. Explain why God held the priesthood to a high standard.
3. Create a plan to improve one aspect of his or her own priestly ministry (1 Peter 2:5).

Introduction

A. A Model for Leadership

In the late 1940s, Billy Graham's ministry was becoming well known. Graham realized that he needed to hold himself and his ministry to an extremely high standard of conduct for the sake of the gospel message he proclaimed. In 1948, Graham and his staff created what they called the "Modesto Manifesto." They pledged themselves to follow the highest standards of conduct in every area of their lives.

When the evangelist died in 2018, tributes to Graham poured in. Many of them cited his uncompromising integrity. Even those who did not accept Graham's message had to acknowledge that he was a man who practiced what he preached. During a time when many public figures were caught up in scandalous behavior, Graham remained a consistent model of faithfulness to Christ.

In the days of the prophet Malachi, the leaders of God's people took the polar opposite approach. What we might call "Malachi's Manifesto" exposed the corruption of these leaders and called attention to what God has always desired.

B. Lesson Context

Malachi mentions no kings at the beginning of his book. This makes establishing an approximate date for the prophet's ministry challenging. Even so, the book's contents offer some clues.

The issues addressed by Malachi are similar to those facing God's people in the time of Nehemiah in the fifth century BC. With permission from King Artaxerxes of Persia, Nehemiah had traveled from Persia to Judah around 445 BC to rebuild Jerusalem's walls.

Some issues addressed by both Nehemiah and Malachi include mixed marriages (Nehemiah 13:23–27; Malachi 2:11), the failure to tithe (Nehemiah 13:10–14; Malachi 3:8–10), and corrupt priests (Nehemiah 13:4–9; Malachi 1:6–2:9). These similarities point to a date for Malachi that is post-exilic. That means the setting is an era after the exile in Babylon (Chaldea) ends in 538 BC (see Ezra 1:1–4).

Bolstering the conclusion that Malachi is post-exilic is the use of the title “governor” (Malachi 1:8). This was Nehemiah’s official title (see Nehemiah 5:14; compare Haggai 1:1; 2:21); before the exile, Judah had kings, not governors. Based on these and other facts, scholars conclude that Malachi is chronologically the last of the prophets, of about 430 BC.

The Babylonian (Chaldean) captivity occurred between the ministries of Micah (see lesson 4) and Malachi. The delinquent leadership against which Micah spoke so passionately had resurfaced in Malachi’s day. And it was just as displeasing to the Lord in Malachi’s time as it had been in Micah’s.

I. Failing the Call (Malachi 2:1–9)

Up to the point where our lesson text begins, Malachi has written in dialogue format. This involves first stating a proposition from the Lord or presenting a scenario, then anticipating a response. That response is followed by the Lord’s rejoinder. Variations of this technique are found throughout the book. This is Malachi’s method of challenging his audience to rethink their practices and alter their way of living.

A. Hear the Lord (vv. 1–4)

1. And now, O ye priests, this commandment is for you.

At the point where our lesson begins, Malachi has already said much about the poor quality of leadership demonstrated by the priests. When the prophet first mentions the priests, he describes them as despising the Lord’s name (Malachi 1:6). The priests are abusing their sacred office by offering defective, unacceptable sacrifices (1:7, 8).

God has made it clear in the Law of Moses that only the best is to be brought to Him in worship. In the case of animals, only those unblemished are to be brought (examples: Leviticus 1:3, 10; 3:1). But instead of finding delight in the privilege of preparing such offerings, these priests look on their work as a “weariness” (Malachi 1:13). The commandment about to be voiced is an invitation to hear God anew and repent. The verse before us therefore begins the transition from problem to solution—or consequences for allowing the problem to continue.

2. If ye will not hear, and if ye will not lay it to heart, to give glory unto my name, saith the Lord of hosts, I will even send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings: yea, I have cursed them already, because ye do not lay it to heart.

The Lord issues a solemn warning to the delinquent priests. Their ministry is intended to bring glory to the Lord’s name (compare Matthew 15:7–9; 1 Timothy 6:16; Revelation 5:12, 13). He is the one they serve. The work they do is to be viewed as a privilege.

But if the priests are unwilling to lay it to heart—take seriously—what the Lord says, then the Lord will send a curse upon them and even curse their blessings (compare Deuteronomy 11:26; 28:20; Jeremiah 13:17). This may refer to the blessing that the priests are to pronounce on the Israelites (Numbers 6:22–27). If so, then God will make that declaration null and void. The unfortunate truth is that unholy priests cause suffering for all the people. Another possible interpretation is that God will curse the harvest so that the crops will not produce as they should. This happened in the time of Haggai nearly a century earlier (Haggai 1:5–11). Since the Law of Moses commands that a tithe of the harvest be given to the Levites (Numbers 18:21), a poor crop means a reduced provision for them. (We remind ourselves that all priests were Levites but not all Levites were priests.)

What Do You Think?

What are some ways to discern a pending problem of cursed blessings today?

Digging Deeper

When difficult times do come, how will you determine if the problem is one of cursed blessings rather than random occurrence?

Referring to God as the Lord of hosts emphasizes His power, especially as a warrior in prophetic books (examples: Isaiah 10:24–26; Jeremiah 11:20; Nahum 2:13). So serious is the heart condition of these priests and the shameful conduct that is the outcome, God says He has already cursed their blessings.

3. Behold, I will corrupt your seed, and spread dung upon your faces, even the dung of your solemn feasts; and one shall take you away with it.

Sinful behavior of a person or group often has consequences for their seed (or descendants; example: 1 Kings 14:9, 10). God declared this to be so in His instructions that accompanied the second commandment (Exodus 20:4, 5). The Hebrew word behind the rendering corrupt is usually translated “rebuke” (examples: Genesis 37:10; Zechariah 3:2), and that is the sense here.

The Lord’s rebuke is depicted in a most shocking manner. Normally the dung of animals that are sacrificed, along with the contents of their intestines, is to be taken outside the camp of the Israelites and burned (Exodus 29:14; Leviticus 4:11, 12). If human waste is in view rather than that of animals, the picture is more shocking still (compare Deuteronomy 23:12–14; Ezekiel 4:12–15). To have dung on one’s face is to be massively dishonored. The language is probably not to be viewed in literal, physical terms. Rather, it is a way of vividly describing how repulsed the Lord is by the priests’ conduct.

What Do You Think?

How can churches do a better job in the area of holding their leaders accountable?

Digging Deeper

Which of these texts best support your response: Matthew 18:15–17; Romans 16:17, 18; 1 Corinthians 5:11–13; 2 Thessalonians 3:14, 15; 1 Timothy 6:3–5; Titus 1:10–16; 3:10? Why?

Take That!

In the early twentieth century, the pie-in-the-face sight gag was introduced as a staple of slapstick comedy. Later, it became an act of political protest. Though pieing was originally intended primarily to be funny, as a political act it is intended to make an opponent look foolish.

Thomas King Forcade was probably the first to employ this method of political protest. In 1970, he pied Otto N. Larsen, chairman of the Commission on Obscenity. Aron Kay witnessed the event and went on to have a storied pieing career himself, hitting the likes of William Buckley Jr., E. Howard Hunt, G. Gordon Liddy, and Andy Warhol. Noel Godin, another noted pie thrower, hit Bill Gates and several others.

Malachi spoke of God’s threatening to smear the faces of His delinquent priests with something far less palatable than a whipped cream-topped pie! Such a humiliation would be accompanied with very real consequences.

In what way does your conduct most invite humiliation—or worse—from the Lord?

—J. E.

4. And ye shall know that I have sent this commandment unto you, that my covenant might be with Levi, saith the Lord of hosts.

The delinquent priests have forgotten, either through passive carelessness or by active intent, the roots of their sacred office and heritage. The priestly covenant goes back to Jacob's son Levi, some of whose descendants are assigned the priesthood (Numbers 3:5–13). Anytime a role is inherited instead of earned by merit, the danger is greater that a person will simply go through the motions. Those of the Levitical priesthood are not immune to this pitfall.

B. Fear the Lord (vv. 5–7)

5. My covenant was with him of life and peace; and I gave them to him for the fear wherewith he feared me, and was afraid before my name.

The special blessings promised to Levi were life and peace, spiritual blessings associated with the Levites' special place in God's service. Levi's descendants in turn were to respond to these favors with fear, expressed as grave respect for the godly tasks they were given (compare Hebrews 12:28, 29).

When one looks at the life of Levi himself, he does not appear to exemplify a great deal of fear toward the Lord. He and his brother Simeon misused the covenant sign of circumcision to avenge the cruel treatment of their sister, Dinah, by Shechem (Genesis 34; 49:5). The Lord's words here perhaps describe what was true of Levi's descendants when Moses pronounced his final blessing on that tribe (Deuteronomy 33:8–11). Later, the Levites did prove themselves to be a God-fearing tribe (see Exodus 32:25–29; Numbers 25:6–13).

6a. The law of truth was in his mouth, and iniquity was not found in his lips.

Three important responsibilities for priests are highlighted in this verse. First, they are to teach the law of truth faithfully (Deuteronomy 33:10). That involves communicating the Lord's requirements to His people (17:9–13). No iniquity is to be found in a priest's speech, a characteristic highly commended by James for the new covenant era (James 3:2).

6b. He walked with me in peace and equity.

Second, the priest's daily walk is to be consistent with his faith profession (compare Genesis 5:22). To be a person of peace goes hand in hand with loving God's law (Psalm 119:165). The Hebrew word underneath the translation equity can also be translated "straight" as opposed to "crooked" (see Isaiah 40:4; 42:16), and that is the sense here. It indicates that the person is virtuous and lacks any deceit (compare John 1:47). The faithful priest exhibits high moral character (compare Psalm 25:21).

6c. And did turn many away from iniquity.

Third, the faithful priest is dedicated to helping others (compare James 5:19, 20). The priest is to set the kind of example that draws others to follow and imitate his righteous lifestyle.

7. For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth: for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts.

The priests in Malachi's day neglect and even abuse the divinely given role they are called to fulfill: every priest is the Lord's messenger. Priests are, in a very real sense, the Lord's representatives to the people as those priests bring God's message (examples: Ezra 7:11; Nehemiah 8). Priests are to look to Him for the knowledge and instruction found only in His law (compare Leviticus 10:11).

What Do You Think?

In what ways is the admonishment to the priests applicable to Christians today, given the reality of our own priesthood (1 Peter 2:9)?

Digging Deeper

If no one seeks God's Word from you as a messenger of the Lord, what problem and solution do you see?

Reliable Delivery

In most parts of the United States, packages can be delivered efficiently by car or truck. But in the central business districts of crowded metropolitan areas, motor vehicles can be hindered. In such areas, businesses often count on bicycle messengers for reliable delivery.

In 1945, one of the earliest recorded American bicycle courier companies was founded. Carl Sparks began Sparkies, an all-bicycle delivery service in San Francisco. By the late 1970s, bicycle messenger and delivery services existed in many of this country's major cities.

Though the end of bicycle couriers has been predicted, technological innovation has not yet significantly reduced the demand for their services. Many items can be sent most efficiently by bike: corporate gifts, original artwork, clothes for photo shoots, and original signed documents are but a few. Some companies would rather send sensitive information by courier to avoid the risk of having their email hacked.

God established a type of delivery service when He founded the nation of Israel. Priests were to transmit God's law from generation to generation. Theirs was precious cargo that the people needed. But there's an even bigger picture to consider: the nation as a whole was to communicate the future arrival of the Messiah to the waiting world.

C. Follow the Lord (vv. 8, 9)

8. But ye are departed out of the way; ye have caused many to stumble at the law; ye have corrupted the covenant of Levi, saith the Lord of hosts.

The task of keeping the covenant of Levi means nothing to the delinquent priests (compare Jeremiah 2:8). Whether the problem is one of mere negligence or of active rebellion, the result is the same: many people stumble (compare 18:15; Hosea 4:6).

What Do You Think?

What are some good ways your church can acknowledge its leaders who are doing the opposite of Malachi 2:8?

Digging Deeper

What will be your part in this initiative?

9. Therefore have I also made you contemptible and base before all the people, according as ye have not kept my ways, but have been partial in the law.

This verse makes the case that the problem is not just one of negligence; if it were, the verse could stop with the phrase ye have not kept my ways. The phrase but have been partial in the law points to conscious, intentional disregard of God's ways (compare, from the era of the judges, 1 Samuel 2:27–33). To be partial in applying the law is abhorrent to the Lord; frequent warnings against doing so are found within the Law of Moses (examples: Leviticus 19:15; Deuteronomy 16:19).

II. Renewing the Call (Malachi 3:5, 6)

The Lord does not merely state a problem and stop there. He goes on to state the solution, which begins in Malachi 3:1 (not in today's text): His "messenger" will "prepare the way" before Him. John the Baptist is the one who will fulfill Malachi's prophecy (Matthew 11:10). Malachi goes on to speak about a second messenger's coming, actions, and results. The refining, purifying, and purging mentioned fit Jesus' work in raising up in His church those who will faithfully serve Him (Malachi 3:3, 4). Though judgment will be brought against all individuals who have violated the covenant, the sons of Levi are still called out specifically (3:3); as teachers, theirs is the greater accountability.

A. Trying Offenders (v. 5)

3:5a. And I will come near to you to judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, and against the adulterers, and against false swearers.

This half-verse and the next elaborate on the judgment to be carried out by the second messenger (see Malachi 3:2, not in today's text). Sorcery and related practices are strictly forbidden in the Law of Moses (example: Deuteronomy 18:9–14). This prohibition in part prevents Israel from seeking to manipulate the Lord with "enchantments" (examples: Exodus 7:11; Isaiah 47:9). Adultery violates the seventh commandment (Exodus 20:14; compare James 2:11; 2 Peter 2:12–14); to swear falsely breaks the ninth (Exodus 20:16; compare Leviticus 19:11, 12; Jeremiah 7:9).

5b. And against those that oppress the hireling in his wages, the widow, and the fatherless, and that turn aside the stranger from his right, and fear not me, saith the Lord of hosts.

The Lord also calls to account all who take advantage of the most vulnerable in Israelite society. The Law of Moses included specific directives to care for each of these groups (examples: Leviticus 19:13; Deuteronomy 24:14–22). Although the hireling, the widow, and the fatherless are likely fellow Israelites, the stranger refers specifically to someone who does not belong to the covenant people by lineage. God shows a special concern for the strangers who live in Israel. He calls His people to remember their own time of oppression while they lived as strangers in Egypt and to treat strangers in their own land quite differently (Exodus 22:21). Ultimately such disregard for these peoples in need and for the principles found in the Law of Moses can be traced to a lack of reverence for the lawgiver, the Lord himself (compare Deuteronomy 31:12, 13; Isaiah 1:2). The fear of the Lord has always been "the beginning of knowledge" (Proverbs 1:7); lack of such fear leads to certain ruin (example: James 5:1–6).

What Do You Think?

In what ways can you use Malachi 3:5 as a source of comfort or encouragement in the face of today's negative headlines?

Digging Deeper

In what ways can you be an empathizer in passing that encouragement along to the oppressed as named in this text?

B. Unchanging God (v. 6)

6a. For I am the Lord, I change not.

God can change His mind (example: Jonah 3:10), but He does not change His character (see James 1:17). His standards of right and wrong always hold true. He will be consistent in carrying out judgment on those who violate these standards, as He has made abundantly clear throughout Scripture.

6b. Therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.

The sons of Jacob, referring to the Israelites, have not been consumed by God's wrath—yet (compare Hosea 11:8, 9). The Lord is merciful because of His promises—and His unchanging character means He will keep those promises.

Conclusion

A. “Familiarity Breeds Contempt”

Malachi's words should serve as sobering warnings to leaders in the church. Dangers abound when we become casual about doing God's work. It's a small step from an attitude of indifference to one of antibiblical rationalizing by those who serve the Lord in leadership positions. The late Dallas Willard once observed, “The greatest threat to devotion to Christ is service for Christ.”

Those who earn wages by serving the church or a parachurch ministry can come to see what they do merely as a source of income. They forget that theirs is a ministry done in service to the Lord and for His glory. Certain words and actions become part of the routine, of what is expected according to their job description. It's a slippery slope.

One source of help may be for the leader to arrange to meet with a group of fellow leaders (either within or outside of the congregation) for mutual prayer and encouragement. Many have found such accountability groups greatly beneficial in keeping them spiritually sharp and providing valuable counsel when temptations or other challenges occur (compare Malachi 3:16).

Speaking honestly to one another can be of immeasurable value in avoiding the spiritual barrenness that brought God's harsh criticism of the priests in Malachi's day. Inviting candid feedback from a fellow servant of Christ is always preferable to being on the receiving end of God's correction!

B. Prayer

Father, keep us from handling sacred duties in such a way that we lose sight of You. Empower our church to remember our covenant with You. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.