

Jason Upchurch - Malachi 2:1-9 - God Expects Godly Leaders

This morning as we look to the Word of God in Malachi we're looking at the priests in the time of Malachi. The priests were the leaders of the people. They taught and modeled the Jews how to worship the one true and living God.

We take for granted now that you can go to Amazon and buy basically any book you want on the Bible or theology. You can download sermons from thousands of preachers and listen to millions of hours of sermons. You can curate your Spotify playlist for the exact worship songs you want including precise theological commitments. We also live in a blessed time where there are 60 like minded churches within an hour drive, and many more that we would still call brothers though they might not be our cup of tea.

We can search out their website, read their doctrinal statement, email the pastor, watch their service online and follow along with the sermon on our phone with one of a dozen or so Bible apps.

These are modern conveniences. Modern blessings. And I do believe there is a lot of blessing in these things. But it's hard to remember that in Israel - and most of church history - this wasn't the case. Most people couldn't travel all that far - you went to the closest church or synagogue in the OT. There was no such thing as church shopping, really. There might be a few churches in your whole town. Most folks throughout history were illiterate or if they could read they didn't have a Bible in their language.

In the OT it was the local priests who taught you everything. In the NT it was the local pastor who taught you everything. Your entire view of God, his commands, salvation, virtues, liturgy, how to raise your kids, love your wife, love your neighbors all came though just one source: your local priest or pastor. And so consequently, your priest had a massive role in your view of all things related to God.

And to some extent that's true today with local pastors. It's not lost on me that I probably have an outsized influence on many of you. All pastors do, and especially those who preach because we open the Word to you over and over.

And that is a humbling reality. **Jas. 3:1:** not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will incur stricter judgment.

That is a sobering threat to all who preach or teach the Word of God. We are called to be the purveyors of nothing but pure truth.

We are called to rightly divide the Word of truth - **2 Tim. 2:15.** Literally the phrase means to cut straight. Tent makers and seamstresses have to be able to cut straight lines. You can't make good products with crooked or jagged lines. The cuts have to be straight and clean if you want to end up with a good product.

Teachers are called to do our best to cut it straight, to deal with the text of Scripture accurately. If we don't stricter judgment is coming. I don't know what all that means but it's not a comfort. It's a warning.

Added to that, teaching isn't just pie in the sky. It's not like a sociology or cultural anthropology class in college.

This actually affects your lives. It affects how you actually live out your obedience to God. So what I teach will impact what you do. And based on that relationship, **Heb. 13:17** says this: Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning for that would be of no advantage to you.

There's a symbiotic relationship here. In spiritual matters you're called to obey your elders, your leaders. That's weighty for you and for us - there's a lot of trust involved. You have to trust we actually have your best eternal interest in mind and are guiding you into righteousness. I really do hope on the day of judgement you look back to the ministry of Andy, Chuck and myself and remember clear times you were taught and warned in ways that had a substantial impact on your life.

Heb 9:27 Hebrews also threatens with judgment: as those who will have to give an account.

There will be a day when every elder will give an account for every person under his charge. I mean, do you know how many Davids I'm going to have to give an account for? I'm like 15-20 deep.

That should weigh heavily on every leader.

Here, the priests in Israel are being addressed directly. We already saw God address them in the last chapter. They were allowing maimed animals to be used for sacrifice. The people were wrong for bringing them but the priests were wrong for allowing them.

Here it's all on the priests. It's all on the leaders that God appointed to shepherd his people. And this is the big picture: God expects godly leaders.

1) Here's the command to leaders. Read 1-2

So God is talking squarely to the priests. These are Israel's leaders, they are very much the mouthpiece of God. And they commanded by God. This command - or some of you have decree - is for them. This is aimed at them.

First is to obey. It's a little redundant, but God commands them to obey his commandments. To give honor to his name. **Read 2**

They are to listen to God. First and foremost the priests are to be obedient to God. The foremost evidence that someone is part of the Kingdom of God is obedience to God. This has always been the case.

1 John 2:4: whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him.

You can't claim to love God and know God and then walk around life in blatant disobedience. Or to put it another way: Faith without works is what? Dead.

God has always commanded obedience to his law. Not as a means of justification. Not as a way of salvation. But as the fruit of someone who is saved.

And this is especially true of leaders. They are to be especially obedient because they are modeling what God has commanded to his people. This is true at every level of society.

Kids learn from parents, citizens learn from leaders, churchgoers learn from their pastors. If the parents are disobedient, they're teaching their kids. If rulers are disobedient they're teaching their citizens. And if pastors are disobedient - or priests in this case - they teach all the rest of the people of God.

No matter how independent you are, if you listen to someone enough you become like them. And if that person is disobedient and reckless, you become disobedient and reckless.

Obedience is commanded by God, it's not optional. That's not to say elders will never fail. I sin, you guys. Go ask my wife and kids. There are times when I've sinned against you guys. All the elders here are sinners - we rely on the blood of Jesus for our justification as much as anyone. But we desire to repent and walk a life of obedience as examples to the flock.

The second thing God commands **heartfelt** obedience. Not just outward obedience. Not just going through the motions. God wants leaders who are obedient from the heart. **Read 2**

He says it twice. Honor my name from the heart. This is really what God wants: heartfelt obedience. Not just an outward show by the leaders, but leaders who love obedience from the inside, from the heart.

Many of you know of the tragic downfall of Steve Lawson. Steve was a well-known preacher from Texas who was recently exposed as having an inappropriate relationship for 5 years with a woman not his wife. No one really knows what the word “inappropriate” means in this context because he hasn’t actually come forward in repentance.

But what’s amazing is that even weeks before his sin was exposed he was preaching boldly against adultery. Preaching boldly against sexually immorality. Well, that’s good, of course. He just didn’t actually believe it in his heart. Be sure your sin will find you out.

Side: It seems like in leadership it’s usually sexual sin and greed. Over and over throughout the Bible those 2 sins seem to come up over and over in leadership.

So this is the command to the leaders: obey God’s commands, and obey them from the heart. What if they don’t?

2) The threat. **Read 2-3**

Well, that’s graphic. But here’s the reality: if the leaders of God’s people dishonor God, he will dishonor them. “You want to bring dead animals to my altar?” Then I’ll smear the dung of those dead animals all over your face.”

That’s what’s happening here. God’s not a pushover. He’s not going to stand idly by while his name is defamed. He’s patient and kind and suffers long. But there comes a point where God will reckon with people, and especially with leaders.

He says their blessing will turn to cursing. In fact, what he actually says is that’s already happening. **Read 2, 9**

God has already begun to bring shame on the priests. How so? The people despise the priests. They hate the spiritual leadership already.

Remember Eli in **1 Samuel**? He was the last of the Judges. He was charged with caring for the nation of Israel and yet he wouldn’t do anything about his own wicked sons? So God says Eli scorned the offering. And God killed his sons and Eli all in one day.

The people despised his leadership and the leadership of his sons. That’s part of the curse. And part of the curse was that even their children would be affected.

I’ve seen the outcome of the kids of hypocritical leaders. It’s bad. Because they see the hypocrisy in full measure. They understand the scam, the lies, the treachery. And even when everyone else knows and they know they see the whole game. And sadly, many times part of the curse of wicked leadership is that the kids are wicked too.

Leaders should be esteemed. Leaders should live lives that are honorable - so much so that people should follow them.

Paul says, follow me as I follow who? Christ. We are called to be models of godly lives. We’re not models of perfection or sinlessness. But you should be able to go to your leaders and say “Man, I want to live like them.” Hebrews says we should look to leaders who finished the race - the ones faithful all the way to the end - and do what they did.

These guys were awful. And God makes an interesting play on concepts here. **Read 3**

When priests sacrificed they would put certain parts of the animal on the altar to be burned to God. The rest of the animal, the entrails, the skin, all the other stuff was dragged outside the camp. That’s what the dung is. Not just the poo, but all of the rest of the animal. And the dung or some of you have offal was unclean. I mean it was gross, but it was ceremonially unclean.

So what God is threatening to do here is take the left over rotting animal carcass that is usually burned outside the camp and smear that all over their face. God is going to defile them in a disgusting way because they're defiling God in a disgusting way.

And like I mentioned, that seems extreme, but what they were doing in dishonoring God was extreme. And sometimes God has to make it clear just how bad our sin is.

A lot of people take their sin lightly. They don't think it's a big deal or all that offensive. I mean, just think about your sin. Is it really as bad as that person in the news or famous person who got caught? We want to justify it, don't we?

But the consequences of sin are massive. All sin. All we have to do to realize how big of a deal our sin is is to Look to the cross. The only thing that would cover it up was the precious blood of God the Son. Nothing else would do.

So God commands the leaders to be obedient to the Law from the heart and he threatens them if they don't.

Now, let me ask you this: when you think of the OC Law, what comes to mind? Do you think of it as a good thing or a bad thing? Do you think it's great?

3) God's Law is Good: **Read 4-5**

In those 2 short verses, God explains just how amazing his Law is.

First of all, God gave the covenant - he gave the Law. The Law is from God which means it's not a bad thing. It's a good think. John Calvin notes in his Institutes that the Law reflects the moral character of God himself. The whole Law is summed up in 2 commands: what are they? Love God and love neighbor.

God loves God. And God loves your neighbor and he wants you to do the same. How? Don't murder your neighbor. Don't lie about her, don't steal from her or even covet what she has. Honor your closest neighbors, your parents...so on and so forth.

All of the Law is given by God graciously for us to know God and love God and love one another. It's all good. And it's amazing that he gave it to Israel. Look how God describes his law. **Read 5a**

The law is life and peace.

Psalm 19:7: The Law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. The Law is designed to bring you to the end of yourself and show you need for salvation.

Psalm 1: Blessed is the man who delights in the Law of the Lord and on his Law he meditates day and night. You want to be blessed in life? You want to keep your way from evil? Meditate on the Law. It's life.

It's peace. If you followed all the principles of the Law you would have a life of peace.

Prov. 15:1 A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.

15:18: A hot tempered man stirs up strife, but he who is slow to anger quiets contention.

God doesn't want strife and arguing and war. He wants he peace. God's city is Jerusalem - the city of peace. Jesus is the prince of peace.

It's no surprise that the Law of God is life and peace. It's also one of fear and awe. **Read 5**

Fear and awe are not bad things. They're good things. When we properly fear God, it sets our lives in order.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. People with PhDs and letters after their name - they really know nothing at all unless they know to fear the Lord. Sure, they might have information, but what they should have is fear.

What leaders should especially have is fear of God, amazement of God. Awe of God. Think of the last time you really stood in awe of something. Like genuine, amazement and wonder.

I've seen some pretty amazing mountains. Just huge and beautiful. I remember driving through southern Kentucky in the fall time and the color of the trees on the mountains for miles and miles was just amazing. The Grand Canyon - just massive geological structure. I remember the first time I saw the ocean and it just went on and on and on.

One nice thing about winter is that on clear night the stars come out early and they're beautiful. Just a small gesture of God's handiwork. And it's awesome.

We should all stand in awe of God. But especially leaders. We're the ones who are to know him the best. We should know his power and righteousness and the eternal stakes that are on the line for us and those in our care. We know the gravity of heartache when people stray from the Law and they do what is right in their own eyes.

God graciously gave a Law of life and peace so that we would have fear and awe of him.

4) Here was the simple job of the Priest: Teach people about God **Read 6-7**

Listen, the basic job of priest and the basic job of a pastor or elder is the same: teach people about God. That could be preaching, counseling, encouraging, rebuking. Bible studies - you name it. The primary task of the leaders of God's people is teaching.

Paul tells Timothy in **2 Tim. 2:2**: and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.

Paul taught the masses, including Timothy. Timothy is to teach other faithful. And those faithful men are to teach others. And so on and so forth and onward forever.

The one massive difference between an elder who rules and a deacon who serves is just one trait: able to teach. In God's church if you're going to lead you have to teach.

Acts 20:27: I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. He wasn't' scared to teach it all. The problem with teaching it all is that it ruffles feathers. It rubs people the wrong way. You don't make a lot of friends teaching it all.

We were doing church discipline one time about 5 years ago and I was preaching a sermon on it and 5 minutes into the sermon a lady who was visiting got up in the middle of the sermon and promptly walked out and never came back.

Levi had true instruction on his mouth. He told the truth about God and God's ways. And because he did that he turned many people back from iniquity. He kept people from sin.

Let me tell you guys, that's hard. You don't have to explain to me what you believe, but I and the elders are charged with explaining to you what the Bible teaches. There are times we have to tell you to do things you might not want to hear. Your flesh wants something else. I'm human I want that too. But that's not how leadership in God's economy works. **Read 7**

The priests guarded knowledge. Not in the sense of keeping people from it, but making sure it was kept pure. Undefined.

And people sought them out. This is why I love your questions and the Q and A sermons. God has blessed me with a job where I feel like I'm cheating. I get to talk about the thing I love with everyone. And as much as I am faithful to his Word I am his messenger. Every priest was and every elder is.

God goes back to the problem of his priests: 8-10

The priests are just the opposite of Levi. Instead of walking with God in peace, they had turned aside from the way.

Instead of turning people from iniquity, they had caused many to stumble.

Instead of honoring the covenant of life and peace, they had corrupted it.

It's hard to imagine that they could possibly be any worse. You know throughout the OT we often think Israel was this pure nation and the pagans around them were the ones who were corrupted. What we actually see over and over is that Israel was just as bad or worse than the pagan nations around them and they did their evil in the name of Yahweh.

They pretended to be religious, pretended to follow God, but as Jesus says they were just blind guides leading the blind.

And so God would judge the priests.

Turn to 2 Tim. 4 for a moment. These are hard sermons because I am by no means perfect. I'm a sinner in need of grace. I've taught things that I look back on and cringe.

You know at the end of his life, the famous Augustine wrote a book called Retractions. It was basically a book recounting all the wrong things he taught through his life and it's 340 pages long. There is a sense in which by the virtue of the teaching office we know we will change and mature. And inevitably there will be retractions.

But in the meantime, here's our charge. And I think it should be your charge too. **Read 1-4**

People have been revolting against sound teaching and right doctrine for thousands of years now. Our charge is the same: Preach. Preach faithfully and accurately for the glory of God.

Pray