

From the Pulpit of Pastor Keith Miller
Northwest Church
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“The Burden of the Word of God”

Malachi 1:1-5

Introduction

We are going to spend about nine weeks in the book of Malachi for several reasons but mainly because its message is so relevant to the Church today. Malachi was written some time after Israel was permitted to rebuild its ruins. Ezra led the rebuilding of Israel’s Temple and Nehemiah led the endeavor to rebuild Jerusalem shortly before Malachi was written.

Under both men, God had caused revival to come to His people. These were some of the most amazing days in Israel’s history, but they did not last. Not long after God used Ezra and Nehemiah to rebuild the temple and Jerusalem, and not long after God had brought a reform and revival to the people of Israel, they grew cold in their affections towards God and their worship became nothing more than a chore.

After the Jerusalem building project, Nehemiah left the city for a period of time and then returned to find the city a moral mess. It is believed that Malachi was written sometime during Nehemiah’s absence. Read Nehemiah 13 this week...

What happened as a result is that the People who once experienced reform allowed sin and disobedience to come into their lives resulting in a skeptical, careless, indifferent, disobedient, adulterous, and stingy people.

Another thing to keep in mind about Malachi is that he was the last prophet to speak for God before the four hundred years of silence between Malachi and Matthew.

I want to read for you a statement from the book, *“The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience”* which I think will help you understand the importance of Malachi’s message.

To say there is a crisis of disobedience in the evangelical world today is to dangerously understate the problem. Born-again Christians divorce at about the same rate as everyone else. Self-centered materialism is seducing evangelicals and rapidly destroying our earlier, slightly more generous giving. Only 6 percent of born-again Christians tithe.

Born-again Christians justify and engage in sexual promiscuity (both premarital sex and adultery) at astonishing rates. Racism and perhaps physical abuse of wives seem to be worse in evangelical circles than elsewhere. This is scandalous behavior for people who claim to be born-again by the Holy Spirit and to enjoy the very presence of the Risen Lord in their lives.

In light of the foregoing statistics, it is not surprising that born-again Christians spend seven times more hours each week in front of their televisions than they spend in Bible

reading, prayer, and worship. Only 9 percent of born-again adults and 2 percent of born-again teenagers have a biblical worldview.

Perhaps it is not surprising either that non-Christians have a very negative view of evangelicals. In a recent poll, George Barna asked non-Christians about their attitudes toward different groups of Christians. Only 44 percent have a positive view of Christian clergy. Just 32 percent have a positive view of born-again Christians. And a mere 22 percent have a positive view of evangelicals.¹

It is amazing to me how a book that was written so many years ago still speaks to us today. Like Israel in Nehemiah's day, those who boast as being members of the Bride of Christ have grown into skeptical, careless, indifferent, disobedient, adulterous, stingy people; not all of the church, but many who claim to be born-again.

Now granted the Bible warns us that many who claim to belong to God actually do not belong to God. But I am also convinced that the church has become guilty of losing sight of her first love. I think that the reason we have so much divorce, adultery, immorality, stingy giving, gossip, and careless worship in the Church today has much to do with the fact that our love affair with God has grown cold.

You know it can happen... You can grow indifferent and disobedient in your relationship with God, and it often happens because you have allowed some form of sin into your life that has eroded the embers of your love for God to a mere spark. Malachi addresses this problem. Malachi defines for us what it means to have a heart for God and what it takes for those embers that still burn for God, to become a bright flame of passionate worship in all that we do for Him.

If you are one of those people that have allowed sin to erode away your love and passion for the God of the Universe, I hope and pray that God will awaken your heart and mind in these upcoming weeks as we look at Malachi. In fact it is my prayer that God will awaken in all of our hearts and minds a deeper love and passion for Him throughout this series.

Before we do anything in this series I would like to camp on just one verse by looking at Malachi 1:1 ...

God's Word is Weighty (v. 1)

The oracle of the word of the LORD to Israel by Malachi.

Malachi begins by stating what it is that he is delivering – The oracle of the word of Yahweh. This word also means burden, which I like a little better than oracle because it gets to the bottom of what the Word of Yahweh was to the Prophet speaking it.

Israel had forgotten God; they have become carnal and rebellious, so what does God do... He sends his messenger (Malachi means: my messenger) to deliver His word.

¹ Ronald J. Sider. *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books; 2005), pp. 27-8.

I want to spend some time on this one verse for one simple reason: It is so easy to lose site of the seriousness of God's Word, especially in a culture that has more than one Bible per household. If we are to get anything out of the Bible, if we expect to be affected and infected by the God's Holy Word then we have got to take it seriously, and to take it seriously we have got to understand how serious God takes His word.

Listen to what the Psalmist has to say about God's Word,

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; ² but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. ³ He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers. ⁴ The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. ⁵ Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; ⁶ for the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

How is it that a person is able to avoid walking in the counsel of the wicked, stand in the way of sinners, and sit in the seat of scoffers? His delight is in the law of God, and it is the Word of God that nourishes and replenishes the person of God.

But lets look at the negative implications that the Bible makes to those who do not delight in God's word and heed its instruction (first turn to James 1:21-22). Turn with me to Isaiah 66:2b-3 and see the negative aspect of not taking God's Word seriously,

But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word. ³ "He who slaughters an ox is like one who kills a man; he who sacrifices a lamb, like one who breaks a dog's neck; he who presents a grain offering, like one who offers pig's blood; he who makes a memorial offering of frankincense, like one who blesses an idol. These have chosen their own ways, and their soul delights in their abominations... (Isa. 66:2b-3)

In other words, the one who does not tremble at God's word and respond to it with a humble and contrite heart is one who's worship is an abomination unto God. Do you understand what this verses is saying? The worship of the one who does not take God's word seriously becomes no different than one who kills a man, like one who breaks a dog's neck, like one who offers pig's blood; like one who blesses an idol. In short, the one who indifferent to God's word is one who's worship is an abomination unto the Lord.

What we learn from the Bible is that if you are not listening to God, if you take what you read or hear from this pulpit and forget about it or remain indifferent to it – your worship is in vain.

The people to whom Malachi prophesied became guilty of the very thing Isaiah warned about and all their forms of worship meant nothing to God because their hearts were far from Him.

God's word is never light nor is it trifling, it is always serous and substantial; this is one of the reasons we stand for the reading of God's word. But our adoration and respect for God's Word must not stop there.

Do you know what is written on the front page in my Bible? *Κηρυξον τον λογον*. That is what my mentor charged me with when he delivered the charge at my ordination ceremony, it means, “preach the word.” This is what the Apostle Paul charged Timothy with in 2 Timothy 4; permit me to read it in its full context,

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: ²preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. ³For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, ⁴and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. ⁵As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.

I took an oath the day my Mentor charged me with that phrase, and that oath was that I would preach this book, both the hard passages and the easy ones. And for me to be the faithful pastor that God has called me to be and what you want and need me to be, I must take the burden of each passage I preach, and deliver it to you as my own burden.

This takes hard work! I spend anywhere from 20-30 hours preparing every sermon I preach, and I make no apologies for doing so, because what Northwest will become will be shaped by what has been said from this pulpit. Or as one theologian put it,

The anemia of evangelical worship... is directly attributed to the absence of genuine expository preaching. Such preaching would confront the congregation with nothing less than the living and active word of God. That confrontation will shape the congregation as the Holy Spirit accompanies the word, opens eyes, and applies that word to human hearts.

Not long before his death, the great reformer Martin Luther made this plea...

Some pastors and preachers are lazy and no good. They do not pray; they do not read; they do not search the Scripture.... The call is: watch, study, attend to reading. In truth you cannot read too much in scripture, and what you read you cannot read too carefully, and what you read carefully you cannot understand too well, and what you understand too well you cannot teach too well, and what you teach well you cannot live too well.... The devil... the world... and our flesh are raging and raving against us. Therefore, dear sirs and brothers, pastors and preachers, pray, read, study, be diligent.... This evil, shameful time is not the season for being lazy, for sleeping and snoring.²

Now I admit that there is a great tension in my own heart regarding how much time I spend in my office versus the time I spend outside of it visiting. One of the things that I covenanted with God that I would not do is give you a bunch of slop from the pulpit due to a lack of preparation or laziness; there are some pastors who have no problem delivering slop to the people they have been called to shepherd (just turn on the cable channel and you will find a whole smorgasbord full of them); you will get no such thing from me.

² Meuser, *Luther the Preacher*, p. 43.

Why? We learn from the Bible that,

...the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

This Book contains the eternal Words of God almighty as He worked through godly men to give it to us in the language of humans. When I read that book it ought to stir me and move me through the Holy Spirit and inspire me unto holy living and it should do the same for you.

Hear is an amazing statistic, are you ready? God gave each and every person in this room a brain for a reason. If you are able to read Readers Digest, Sports Illustrated, the local news paper, you are able to read the Bible. You might not understand all of it, but you certainly can understand some of it.

A flabby mind is no badge of honor. A mindless Christianity will foster a spineless Christianity. An anti-intellectualistic gospel will spawn an irrelevant gospel that doesn't get beyond "felt need." That's what is happening in our churches today. We've lost our Christian mind, and for the most part we don't see the necessity of recovering it. We don't understand that where there is little difference between the Christian and non-Christian in what we think and believe, there will soon be little difference in how we live.³

This is the point Malachi is making in this word to Israel.

After Roimaw and I were engaged to get married, she had to go to Burma for about six months. I hated those six months, and the reason I hated them was because I was apart from the one with whom I feel deeply in love (and still am by the way). We could not talk much because it was so expensive, so we wrote each other.

Now I don't know about you, but the love letters I received from her were not tossed aside. No, I opened those babies up immediately; when I read them, I didn't read them causally. When I read the love of my life's letters, I read them very carefully, side to side, top to bottom. I meditated on every word she wrote. Why should it be any different with the love letter God has written you?

This letter is no ordinary letter! We have seen that the words it holds contain life. We have seen that the words in this book are not only living and active, not only do they judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart, but the one who meditates on this book is like the tree planted by a stream of clean water.

The person who meditates on this book is the one who prospers in all that he does because this book has so affected his/her mind that he/she thinks and acts in a way that God thinks and acts, because by meditating on this book, you hear God! Now do you not want to hear from the One who calls you His own, for it is through His words you find life.

³ Walter Marshall. *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*; p. xxiii.