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Northwest Church
August 28, 2005

The Dangers of Pastoral Ministry: A rebuke for Careless Clergy Malachi 2:1-9

Introduction

If you have been the victim of abusive clergy or have witnessed the moral failure of someone who has been called to shepherd... this sermon is for you.

What I am about to say, was for me as I prepared my thoughts, a sobering reminder of my responsibility as your pastor, and I think you will discover why as we dig into our text.

Last week we spent a lot of time looking at what it was that Israel was getting so wrong in their worship. We saw that the people were bringing to the altar what was lame, blind and sick; we also saw that the blame for such worship was placed on the Priest because they sat and gave their approval as the people brought their cheapest and poorest offerings in worship.

What Malachi does in chapter two is shift his focus entirely on the priests, for it was their hypocrisy that was the kindling for Israel's half-hearted and evil worship. It was the clergy who allowed the people to bring their lame, sick and blind offerings, and by accepting it they indorsed it.

I have been where some of you have been; I have sat as a parishioner under the teaching of pastors who were living a double standard and I have seen what careless and abusive clergy can do to a church.

Before we go any further, there are two questions I want to answer before we look at this passage...

1. Who are the priests today?
2. Are the clergy of today in anyway related to the priests of Malachi's day?

The first thing I want to point out was that in Malachi's day you had many priests who were all from the tribe of Levi. The worship and the responsibility of the priests all functioned to point to a greater reality and coming promise, which Hebrews 7:23-28 says was answered in Jesus Christ,

"The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, ²⁴ but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. ²⁵ Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. ²⁶ For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. ²⁷ He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself. ²⁸ For the law appoints men in their weakness as

high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever.”

Not only do we have one High priest who is perfect and permanent, but we learn from the Bible that every member of His church is a Priest,

“As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, ⁵ you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”
(1 Peter 2:5)

So what we need to understand as we go into this passage is that although the rebuke of Malachi 2:1-9 is for the clergy, it is also applicable to you too.

What I would like to do now is spend some time on what it was that the Old Testament Priests were called to do, and what the priest's of Malachi's day failed to do and what the application is for me as your pastor and you as a member of the Bride of Christ.

God's Priests are Called to Speak for God (2:5-7).

“My covenant with him [Levi] 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. ⁶ True 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. ⁷ For 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.”

In the middle of God's stinging rebuke against Israel's priests, He reminds them what it was they were called to do by alluding back to a time when the Levites stood for what was right. When the priests heard these words, I think they would have recalled the day when Moses discovered Israel gave themselves to pagan worship and immorality,

“And when Moses saw that the people had broken loose (for Aaron had let them break loose, to the derision of their enemies), ²⁶ then Moses stood in the gate of the camp and said, "Who is on the LORD's side? Come to me." And all the sons of Levi gathered around him. ²⁷ And he said to them, "Thus says the LORD God of Israel, 'Put your sword on your side each of you, and go to and fro from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you kill his brother and his companion and his neighbor.'" ²⁸ And the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses. And that day about three thousand men of the people fell. ²⁹ And Moses said, "Today you have been ordained for the service of the LORD, each one at the cost of his son and of his brother, so that he might bestow a blessing upon you this day.” Exodus 32:25-29

What Malachi does here is remind the clergy of his day what kind of priests they were called to be and then he contrasts this by what they actually are...

- 1. A reverence for God**
- 2. A commitment to the truth of God's Word**
- 3. A pattern of walking with God**
- 4. A desire for understanding God**

Notice that the four qualities of a godly priest function rest on the importance of God's Word. How does one get to the point of revering God, how does one walk with God, how does one seek to understand God, and how does one become committed to the truth of God's Word? By it becoming a part of who you are.

Have you ever wondered why the New England States have grown so cold to the Gospel even though God poured out His Spirit in those states in one of the most profound ways? Some pastors did not like the bias that God played a sovereign role over the salvation of men and women, so men like Charles Chauncy turned to a brand of Arminianism that led to Unitarianism and Universalism.

The reason the New England states are what they are today is because there were Pastors more committed to their version of a "fair" God rather than the Biblical teaching of a sovereign God.

We want what makes us feel good, and cursed is the Pastor who gives his people what makes them feel good at the expense of the truthfulness of God's Word, for that is exactly what the clergy of Malachi's day were doing, for the Prophet Micah writes,

"Hear this, you heads of the house of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel, who detest justice and make crooked all that is straight,¹⁰ who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with iniquity.¹¹ Its heads give judgment for a bribe; its priests teach for a price; its prophets practice divination for money; yet they lean on the LORD and say, "Is not the LORD in the midst of us? No disaster shall come upon us."¹² Therefore because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height." (Micah 3:9-12).

So where do present day clergy fit into this mix? Look at Malachi 2:7, "For 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."

You know it is not just chance that the same God who created the system of worship in the Old Testament is the same God who created the New Testament. So, what we see here is a striking parallel of the call of the Old Testament clergy and the call of the New Testament clergy

Shortly before Paul died he encouraged a young pastor named Timothy to, "*preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching*" (2 Tim. 4:2)

In Titus we learned that the Elder, which I am, "must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it" (Titus 1:9).

This is the way Jesus Christ set up His Church, for the Bible says in Ephesians 4:11, "...He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of the ministry, for building up the body of Christ..."

And this is why we read in Hebrews 13:17, “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.”

But oh, if some of us pastors would head the words of James 3:1, “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.” Just because a person feels called into the ministry does not mean that they are called by God.

And as was the case for the clergy of the Old Testament so it is in our day... The clergy has been called to the task to lead, teach, and guide, but this is not what God’s priests were doing in Malachi’s day.

God’s Priests Failed to Speak for God

“And now, O priests, this command is for you. ² If 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. ³ Behold, I will rebuke your offspring, and spread dung on your faces, the dung of your offerings, and you shall be taken away with it. ⁴ So shall you know that I have sent this command to you, that my covenant with Levi may stand, says the LORD of hosts.... ⁸ But 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, ⁹ and 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.”
(Malachi 2:1-9)

There are four failures of the clergy of Malachi’s day that are true of the ungodly clergy of our day...

1. A failure to listen to God (v. 2a)

Look at verse one. One of the reasons the men who were called to teach and shepherd did not listen to God’s word. The failure to listen to God here was also due to unrepentant heart. These guys didn’t care about what God had to say regarding their conduct.

The reason why this was such a terrible failure on the priests part was because one of the responsibilities of their office was that they were “messengers of the LORD of hosts” (v. 7c). If they were not listening to God, how in the world could they possibly speak for God?

This is one of the dangers of pastoral ministry. It is very easy to get so caught up in the business of our calling that we fail to spend adequate time in God’s Word. There are some pastors who just don’t spend the time that is needed to hear from God, and I can bet you that this is the first symptom of pastoral failure. The terrible result is that God’s spokesmen cries, “thus says the Lord” when the Lord didn’t say a thing to him.

The second failure was...

2. A failure to honor/glorify God (v. 2b)

These clergy were not concerned about the honor/glory of God. So, the reason the poor and cheapest offerings were accepted was because the motive behind the offerings were symbolic of the heart of the priests. There was no burden within the hearts of these priests to see the God of all creation honored/glorified.

Brothers and sisters, as a pastor I can talk about the glory of God all I want, but if it is not something that stirs my soul than I am not really concerned about it am I? If you ever need to leave this church, don't leave for another church where the pastor has no real burden for the glory of God. You will find yourself thirsty and hungry after every sermon.

One of the main symptoms of a Pastor who has no burden for the honor/glory of God is that his sermons are meant to tickle your ears, put money in his pocket, or make you feel better about yourself. Look at Moses, Isaiah, or John how did they feel about their self-esteem after they encountered God?

3. A Failure to live for God (v. 8a, 9)

As a result of not listening to God and Honoring Him in their hearts, their walk was a reflection of their spiritual condition. Whenever a pastor develops a lifestyle of not staying in God's word or there is no burden in his heart for the glory and honor God's reputation, you will begin to see it in his life.

The closer a pastor walks with God, the less likely he will be to fail spiritually; this is true without exception. Some of you have witnessed this phenomena in your lifetime and I have witnessed it several times.

I remember on situation about two years ago. I had a pastor call me and ask if I would be willing to preach at his church which I was happy to do so. I spoke from Ephesians 1:1-14 and stressed who we were in Christ. Now I do not know what it was, but four days after I had spoken at that church one of the wives of the elders confessed to having a three year affair with that same pastor who asked me to come and speak. Little did I know that she was in the congregation that day. I bet you that that pastor's moral failure began with the amount of time He spent in God's Word and the passion in his heart for the honor and glory of God.

4. A failure to teach God's Word (v. 9b)

The priests were not only half-hearted in their worship of God, but they were half-hearted when it came to teaching His Word. They weren't interested in God, they were only interested in themselves. Micah 3:11 lets into the heart of their motives, "their priests teach for a bribe."

You've seen these kinds of guy on TV haven't you? I think it was Jim Baker who said, "God wants me to build a shopping mall." I am warning you that there are Pastors who are indeed wolves in sheep's clothing who are only interested in what they can gain from you. They are "...blots and blemishes, reveling in their deceptions while they feast with you. They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin. They entice unsteady souls. They have hearts trained in

greed. Forsaking the right way, they have gone astray.... waterless springs and mists driven by a storm.... They promise freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption. (2 Peter 2:13-15)

Which lead many to stumble (v. 8)

How did they cause many to stumble? By their instruction. This failure was the result of all the other failures, which was a minimizing of deep spiritual commitment to doctrinal, biblical truth.

Not long ago, I ran into a man outside a restaurant in Steamboat Springs who's name is Dave. As we talked, he began to pour out his heart to me and what I learned sent chills down my spine. You see, Dave used to go to church with his wife regularly and was actively involved in Church, until his wife left him for the Pastor that he respected. Dave is on his fourth marriage and has never been in church since.

The danger of pastoral ministry is that the pastor has been called to speak for God and lead His people, but God threatens terrible things when we fail to do what we have been called to do. I like how John Piper put it in one of his sermons on this passage,

...let me say a word to those of you who have been the victim of priestly failure. I have in mind people who have seen in the Christian ministers so much hypocrisy and expediency and inconsistency and worldliness and partiality and greed and cowardice and pettiness and harshness and insensitivity, that you have stamped a big question mark on the reality of the whole Christian faith or put up a big wall between you and the ministry of the Word.

God has something to say to you in this text. And I think what he is saying goes like this: I hate priestly hypocrisy ten thousand times more that you do. And I intend to smear dung in the face of every pastor who forsakes my glory, departs from my ways, teaches for hire and causes people to stumble. Vengeance is mine, I will repay says the Lord, don't take it on yourself.¹

What does God mean by smearing dung in the faces of those who hold the office of clergy but do not honor the call that God places on the clergy? Listen to verse 3 again, "Behold, I will rebuke your offspring, and spread dung on your faces, the dung of your offerings, and you shall be taken away with it."

So what does God mean by the threat to spread dung on the faces of Clergy who cause many to stumble because they fail...

- Listen to God
- Honor God
- Follow God
- Speak for God

Listen to Leviticus 4:11 says is to be done with certain parts of the sin offering,

¹ John Piper. *The Glory of Priestly Success*.

“But the skin of the bull and all its flesh, with its head, its legs, its entrails, and its dung—all the rest of the bull—he shall carry outside the camp to a clean place, to the ash heap and shall burn it up on a fire of wood.”

What God told his priests in this passage and what He is telling us today is that because of their sin of causing many to stumble, He will regard them as ceremonially unclean, no longer fit or approved to fulfill the office of priest.

Did you know that we pastors have a similar warning? Turn in your Bibles to 1 Timothy 5:17-20,

“Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. ¹⁸ For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer deserves his wages." ¹⁹ Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. ²⁰ As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.”

What Malachi says in nine verses, Titus summarizes in just three verses, “For an overseer, as God’s steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.”

If you are the victim of the clergy who have failed to uphold the call of Pastor, then I let me assure you that God’s disgust is 10,000 times more intense and warns that He will spread dung on their faces by dealing with them personally – just give it some time.