

THE BOOK OF MALACHI - When Spiritual Intimacy Feels Elusive - Pt 3
Sunday, November 6th, 2022, 5:30 p.m.
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SETTING YOUR HEART TO HONOR THE LORD

Malachi 2:1-9 - "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. [5] My covenant with him 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. [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."

This is another passage that is primarily addressed to the priests and the spiritual leaders of the people. The sins that are growing among the people have a source. They didn't just happen, even though those kinds of sins usually *look* like they just happen.

Malachi says the fundamental problem is that the leaders - those who should be the most spiritually sound and mature - **no longer truly honor God**. They've taken to the pursuit of **success** and **acceptance** in their ministry into their own hands and produced results on their own terms. It's amazing how far we can sink into empty religious patterns - and maintain them for long periods of time - and all the while not honor God at all. It's also amazing that a heart that once **did** honor God can grow slack and corrupt, even among those from whom you'd never expect such slackness or corruption.

What compounds this problem is the fact that we don't find it easy to admit that we're not honoring God. Leaders don't repent easily. Most of us readily admit that we all have the **potential** to not honor Him - you know, **"There, but for the grace of God go I."** We all know that and agree with the sentiment. But that's not the same as admitting the specific area where we're not honoring God **right now**.

That's very difficult for all of us to do, especially if the sin is a cherished, deeply rooted, fostered kind of undercover rebellion - one that we've planned, nursed, and spent much time **pursuing** and **justifying** in the past. And that whole process of justified rebellion against the Lord is made easier when I can use my position of spiritual leadership and the **outward results** of that leadership to satisfy my own heart that I must be right.

At whatever point I've lost **child-likeness** and simplicity before God - at whatever point in my walk with the Lord that I've become **defensive** - I'm not honoring Him anymore. In fact, I've made it impossible to hear His voice in my heart. That's what today's passage is all about.

1) **FIRST, GOD GIVES A LESSON ON HOW HIS WORD IS TO BE HEARD IN THE HEART**

Malachi 2:1-2 - "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**.

Actually, it seems, at first glance, that God is missing the real problem. It was the **people** who were corrupting the worship with their cut-rate sacrifices. There must have been a real temptation for the priests to pass the buck. "Why are you coming to us? **We** didn't bring these sacrifices. Go after those half-hearted worshipers of Yours."

But God goes back to the **source** of the corrupt worship. "The people are bringing those sacrifices to Me because **you** are letting them. **They** don't respect the truth anymore because **you** don't!" The people were **unconfronted** and **unrebuked** in their disobedience because the leaders didn't want to appear intolerant or **out of step with the times**.

Notice those last words - "**...You do not lay it to heart**"(2:2). The people and the **leaders** had forgotten how to **hear** God. Hearing God doesn't take place in the **eardrum**. It takes place in the **heart**. God is properly heard when my life lines up with what He is saying. God is heard when no obstacle loosens or delays the grip of His unquestioned authority on all of my attitudes and actions.

Malachi 2:2 - “**If you will not listen, if you will not take it to heart to give honor to my name....**” The second clause explains the first. Listening *means* setting my heart to honor His Name. The priests heard what God had said about worshiping Him. They had properly understood all the details of what God has revealed. They had agreed with all of it and said it was right - like we say "Amen!"

But they hadn't made sure that God's Words were carried out. They **stalled**. They **delayed**. They **made excuses**. So God says they hadn't listened at all. They didn't give God's Word proper weight. And there seemed to be good reasons for not doing so. It didn't seem that listening to God would work. There were extenuating circumstances.

And it's right at this point that we get the clearest lesson on what hearing God is all about. Hearing God means hearing Him first. It means putting His words in first place. It means placing them over and above my own desire for acceptance or popularity or position. It means God's honor takes dominance over every competing voice and desire.

So the priests become an object lesson for all of us. They knew what God wanted. And they wanted it too. But the pressure from the people was in the opposite direction. And the priests put the words of the people ahead of the Word of God. They heard God but they didn't hear Him **first**.

And it's what you do ***first*** that's the measuring stick of everything in the Kingdom of God: **Matthew 6:33** - **"But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."**

And note the contrasting results. Seek Him first and everything else falls into its proper sphere of blessing. Seek Him second and everything you were trying to protect and manipulate ends up cursed. And that leads to my second point:

2) **THE EFFECT OF NOT PROPERLY HEARING GOD'S WORD**

Malachi 2:2-3,9 - **"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....2:9....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."**

God underscores one of the principles of life in His kingdom. It's the way His rule works itself out in our lives. It's a rule that sounds hopelessly superstitious and out of date with the minds of many people today. God will not allow any who profess Him to prosper indefinitely in any form of rebellion to His known will. It's one of those, ***"Mark it down and remember it all your life"*** rules. There are no exceptions.

Please understand what I'm saying, and what I'm not saying. If you've never brought your life under the umbrella of God's rule - your not making any pretense to being saved, or born again, or under the Lordship of Jesus - **there are many areas of life where you can still do quite nicely** - at least as far as life in this world is concerned. You can be moral, successful, popular, and make a lot of money.

But if you are **pretending** to honor God with some or most of your life, but still cling to rebellion to His known will - and by that I mean something that He's spoken clearly to you about and wants dealt with - if **that's** the position you're in, you need to know that God will not allow you to prosper in that rebellion indefinitely.

This rule from God isn't a **mean** rule. God's firm correction comes from His loving heart. He loves us too much to leave us bound in self-interest and loves the world too much to deprive them of a full-blooded witness to His greatness through our pure and fully devoted lives.

We need to remember these motives because the prophet uses an old word we don't hear much anymore. And it **sounds** like a loveless word. He uses the word **"curse"** to describe God's response to a life lived in rebellion to His Word. And while it's an old word, it's a good word. It reminds us that God isn't passive about how we treat His Name. It tells us He involves Himself in opposing those who live hypocritically. And it reminds us even a **believer** can put himself in a position of downward spiritual spiral and ruin - a no win place for the rest of his life.

Several different phrases are full of meaning for us. **First**, “**I will curse your blessings**”(2:2). And **second**, “**Behold, I will rebuke your offspring....**”(2:3). There are two important thoughts captured in these phrases:

- a) **First, this failure to listen deeply to God can't be whitewashed away or glossed over or ignored.** The priests tried to put a **positive message** in front of the people to keep the image shiny. Does this sound at all familiar? The priests would pronounce a blessing on the people. They did it because people **love** blessings. Cursings don't fill auditoriums or sell books. So the leaders tried in every way they could to keep the image upbeat.

And you can't help but feel the weight of the stark contrast of God saying "**I will curse your blessings**" This is God's way of saying that sin and rebellion isn't rinsed away by some benediction or religious slogans. You can pour on all the empty words you want. It will only serve to deepen their guilt and shame. **You can't bless your way out of this mess.**

I've seen people come up with such glowing sounding stories and testimonies to cast a better light on plain old sin. I've seen people try to justify gossip by calling it food for prayer - justify immoral relationships with the opposite sex by saying they're married in the eyes of God - justify stupid binding habits in their lives by saying they've been delivered from legalism.

I say it humbly, but after 47 years of pastoring, I've heard it all before. And let me tell you in love, it won't work. It never works. It never can work. We have an infinite capacity to redefine so many things in flowery, glorious, almost holy, blessed speech. But it will not wash with God. You can never make disobeying God a blessed thing. You can never change God's mind. Don't go pronouncing blessings on what God doesn't bless. It's spiritual suicide.

I said there were two thoughts in these second and third verses:

- b) ***Second, God says He would "rebuke their offspring"(2:3).*** That word, "***offspring***", in the Hebrew is literally "***seed***" or even "***grain***". Some translations take it to mean "***seed***" ***like a seed of corn you would put in the ground.*** Others, including the NIV, take it to mean ***seed like the "seed of Abraham."*** So they've translated it "***descendants,***" or "***offspring.***"

It's a bit of an open debate because the context doesn't really settle the issue clearly. Either way, the same point can be made. It has to do with God cutting off something that ***sustains your future.***

And there's something awfully important - too important to miss. What would make a group of highly trained and instructed priests think that they could suddenly reinvent God's rules of sacrifice and worship? How could they think that they could so blatantly disgrace the Name of God with total impunity?

What makes sins that are so obviously wicked so easy for intelligent people to commit. That's the red-hot issue this ancient text is dealing with. And the simple answer is they thought they were making something work. They thought they were making the best of a bad situation. They thought God would understand their circumstances. And, because the people they were leading bought into it, their disobedience was making a bleak situation look quite a bit brighter. The people were more content. The priests' message was much more inviting. The crowds were improving.

Enter God. "If you choose to disregard me, you can continue planting your own ideas and decisions. You can make up your own rules as you go along. You can think that you are somehow an exception to my dealings with mankind since the fall of Adam. And you can sing your songs of blessing. But nothing abiding or fruitful or pleasing to My Name will come from all your efforts."

You will never know how many times I've sat with people trying to convince them that some course of action - that ***isn't yet*** manifesting itself in any pain or sorrow or bondage - but that is nonetheless contrary to God's revealed will, is going to lead to sorrow and emptiness and destruction somewhere down the road. And most of the time people - supposedly ***Christian*** people - won't believe me or listen to me. It's the deception of a hardened heart. And it will end, always, in a fruitless life.

3) **IN CONTRAST TO THESE PRIESTS, THE LEVITES ARE MENTIONED**

Malachi 2:4-6 - "So shall you know that I have sent this command to you, that my covenant with Levi may stand, says the Lord of hosts. [5] My covenant with him 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."

Why did God entrust this priestly ministry to the Levites? What was so special about them?

Exodus 32:19-29 - "And as soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses' anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain. [20] He took the calf that they had made and burned it with fire and ground it to powder and scattered it on the water and made the people of Israel drink it.[21] And Moses said to Aaron, "What did this people do to you that you have brought such a great sin upon them?" [22] And Aaron said, "Let not the anger of my lord burn hot. You know the people, that they are set on evil. [23] For they said to me, 'Make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.'"

[24] "So I said to them, 'Let any who have gold take it off.' So they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf." [25] 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."

Verse 26 is sheer beauty. The Levites stood out because they weren't afraid to distance themselves from any who questioned the authority of God. They chose God over all of the rest who didn't step forward when Moses asked. They listened to God *first*.

4) TWO TESTS FOR SPIRITUAL HEARTS

Malachi 2:7-9 - “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. [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.”

- a) ***Priests should stay grounded in what God has said.*** The warning here is to priests and leaders, but the lesson bears fruit for all of us. The primary force working against that is the ***itch of the crowd***. We all find the pleasure of a certain crowd - the love and laughter of friends, the approval of business associates, the admiration of colleagues - but the applause of ***some*** crowd - to be the greatest pull in the opposite direction of the call and will of our Lord and Redeemer.
- b) ***The people should watch their appetites*** - God says the people should ***"seek instruction"*** 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.”***

How many Christians do you know who are just possessed by a passionate love for hearing God's instruction so they can obey Him at deeper and deeper levels? How many Christians do you know who leave church on Sunday worrying that there may have been ***one little thing*** they missed - just ***one point*** of following Christ that they may have overlooked. Which do you think we hear most, concern about ***that*** or concern about the service being too long, or the music too loud, or the lights too dim? How many do you know who are looking for three services on Sunday because two sermons just isn't anywhere near enough to satisfy their desire for Biblical input?

Notice the ***verb*** in that seventh verse - "***For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth...***" The people weren't just to ***absorb*** knowledge but "***seek***" it. They were to go to any length - go out of their way - to get it.

And all the people said...