

Leading Justly

Bible Background • MALACHI 2–3

Printed Text • MALACHI 2:1–9; 3:5–6 | Devotional Reading • PSALM 50:1–15

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: DETERMINE the significance of justice for spiritual leadership, AFFIRM the value of covenanted reverence of God for leadership, and PRACTICE just spiritual leadership.

In Focus

It was the last Sunday Pastor Long would address his congregation. Sitting behind his desk, he reflected on the first time he addressed his congregation. Pastor Long remembered how humble he felt that the congregation had chosen him as their leader after a two-year search.

That was forty years ago. Pastor Long remembered he prayed that his new church would be a community of faith that would live just lives and pray. He prayed that God would keep him safe from temptation and scandal. He prayed for honest elders and deacons to help him lead the congregation. He prayed he would learn the personal stories of his congregants so he would feel the heartbeat of the congregation. He prayed the members of the congregation would show compassion toward one another and strengthen and challenge each other. He prayed for a community of faith that would bear each others' burdens and help the oppressed, the fatherless, and the poor. Finally, he prayed that his leadership would bring others to Christ. On this last Sunday, Pastor Long walked out in front of the congregation feeling confident that God had answered all his prayers—God had done all he asked.

How does God bless honest leaders in His church? What is His reaction to dishonest leaders?

Keep in Mind

“Listen to me and make up your minds to honor my name,” says the LORD of Heaven’s Armies, ‘or I will bring a terrible curse against you. I will curse even the blessings you receive. Indeed, I have already cursed them, because you have not taken my warning to heart’” (Malachi 2:2, NLT).

Words You Should Know

A. Corrupt (3:2) ga‘ar (Heb.)—To rebuke or reprove

B. Seed (3:2) zera‘ (Heb.)—Seed for growing a crop; often used metaphorically for sperm and therefore descendants

Say It Correctly

Malachi. MAL-uh-kay.

Haggai. HAH-guy.

KJV

1 Malachi 2:1 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.

3:5 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.

NLT

1 Malachi 2:1 "Listen, you priests—this command is for you!

2 Listen to me and make up your minds to honor my name," says the LORD of Heaven's Armies, "or I will bring a terrible curse against you. I will curse even the blessings you receive. Indeed, I have already cursed them, because you have not taken my warning to heart.

3 I will punish your descendants and splatter your faces with the manure from your festival sacrifices, and I will throw you on the manure pile.

4 Then at last you will know it was I who sent you this warning so that my covenant with the Levites can continue," says the LORD of Heaven's Armies.

5 "The purpose of my covenant with the Levites was to bring life and peace, and that is what I gave them. This required reverence from them, and they greatly revered me and stood in awe of my name.

6 They passed on to the people the truth of the instructions they received from me. They did not lie or cheat; they walked with me, living good and righteous lives, and they turned many from lives of sin.

7 "The words of a priest's lips should preserve knowledge of God, and people should go to him for instruction, for the priest is the messenger of the LORD of Heaven's Armies.

8 But you priests have left God's paths. Your instructions have caused many to stumble into sin. You have corrupted the covenant I made with the Levites," says the Lord of Heaven's Armies.

9 "So I have made you despised and humiliated in the eyes of all the people. For you have not obeyed me but have shown favoritism in the way you carry out my instructions."

3:5 "At that time I will put you on trial. I am eager to witness against all sorcerers and adulterers and liars. I will speak against those who cheat employees of their wages, who oppress widows and orphans, or who deprive the foreigners living among you of justice, for these people do not fear me," says the LORD of Heaven's Armies.

6 "I am the LORD, and I do not change. That is why you descendants of Jacob are not already destroyed."

The People, Places, and Times

Malachi.

The book of Malachi is the last of the Minor Prophets and the last prophetic voice to God’s people before John the Baptist. The book is believed to have been written between 450–430 BC, a century after Cyrus, the king of Persia, issued a decree allowing the Jews to return to Judah after their Babylonian exile. The Temple had been rebuilt in 515 BC, and houses were reconstructed; however, their spiritual lives remained in ruins. It is debated as to whether Malachi, which means, “My messenger,” is the name of an actual person or simply a title attributed to a prophet tasked with relaying God’s message to His sinful people. The issues that Malachi addresses are similar to those found in Ezra and Nehemiah, which means he either preached during their time or in the generation following them.

Background

One hundred years after their return, the Jews had expectations of how life should be for God’s chosen people. They had rebuilt the Temple and reinstated Temple worship as instructed by Haggai and Zechariah years prior. And yet, they were still in economic turmoil, suffered from poor crops, and were a far cry from the major independent nation that they once were. There was little evidence of the blessings promised to Abraham and Moses. This suffering, though brought about from their forefathers’ repeated disobedience, caused them to question God’s love. As a result of their disappointment and disillusionment, their hearts were indifferent or hardened toward God. The priests and the people violated many requirements of the Mosaic Law—haphazardly making sacrifices, tithes and offerings, marrying pagans, divorcing freely, and living morally bankrupt lives in general.

Why do you believe people ask “Does God really love me?” in the face of trials? What can this indicate about a person’s view of God?

At-A-Glance

1. God’s Warning to the Priests (Malachi 2:1–4)
2. Priestly Examples (vv. 5–7)
3. The Priests’ Sins (Malachi 2:8–9, 3:5–6)

In Depth

1. God’s Warning to the Priests (Malachi 2:1–4)

First, the Lord lays out His case against the priests (Malachi 1:6–11). There were specific requirements for offerings and sacrifices according to Mosaic Law. The priests, in their indifference to the Lord, failed to comply, complaining that His requirements were “too hard.” They allowed offerings that were not true sacrifices—from stolen animals to animals that were unfit for any other use, presenting “gifts” to God that would not even be appropriate for an earthly leader. These priests defiled the Temple and dishonored the Lord. Not only were they offensive, but also they failed to acknowledge their offensiveness, feigning ignorance and seeking to justify their actions.

In response, God commanded that they choose to honor Him. He warned them that failure to do so would lead to curses. These curses would be so effective that even those things that were expected to be blessings would be cursed, like the required provisions to the Levites from other Jews. However, this destruction would not stop

with them; it would extend to their descendants. Ironically, the cause of their current suffering stemmed from the disobedience of their forefathers, and they were on the path of continuing the cycle.

The graphic picture the Lord provides is that of smearing feces on their faces. Not only would they be made unclean and unfit for service, they would be discarded and exposed. This would happen so that the priestly Levitical line could be purified and restored, and His covenant with them could continue.

Why do some people believe it is “too hard” to follow God and His ways?

2. Priestly Examples (vv. 5–7)

Following the incident of the Golden Calf (Exodus 32), the Levites came forward when Moses asked for those who were for the Lord. The Levites then obeyed Moses’ command to kill those who had rebelled. God instructed Moses to set these descendants of Levi apart for His service. Those who rebelled against the covenant with God died amidst the turmoil of sin and rebellion. The Levites, however, were obedient and faithful to the covenant. It is in this context that the Lord reminds these disobedient priests that the covenant He made with Levi was one of life and peace. The prophet delineates the characteristics of those who are examples of positive and godly leadership. Truth, peace, and equity are benchmarks for the lifestyle that does not accept inequity. Faithful leaders seek God for the truth as His messengers. The Levites revered and honored the Lord, speaking truth, living righteously, and obeying the Lord. The Levitical priests of old did as they were ordained: they instructed the people and preserved the knowledge of God. While prophets were typically called messengers of God, here Malachi uses it for those priests.

How can considering the examples of the past help us to live more faithfully in the present?

3. The Priests’ Sins (Malachi 2:8–9, 3:5–6) In contrast to how the former Levites lived, these priests were not committed to the truth. Not only did they allow Israel to fall away from the Lord, but they caused them to sin with false teaching. They showed favoritism in serving, cheating, and oppressing the vulnerable, involving themselves in all types of ungodliness. The all-knowing, ever-present, self-existent God would be His own witness against them and the judge. There would be no escape. And because of the public nature of their sins and positions, the judgment would be for all to see.

How can we resist temptation to abuse positions of authority, and how can we help those who are taken advantage of by those in power?

Search the Scriptures

1. What did God say about the blessings of those who are disobedient (Malachi 2:2)?
2. How did God characterize Levi (v. 6)?
3. What wicked groups are described in Malachi 3:5?

Discuss the Meaning

In the Bible we see the detrimental effects of leaders who strayed away from the Lord. Throughout 1 and 2 Kings, Israel and Judah’s kings are characterized by whether they followed in their forefathers’ footsteps in obedience or disobedience. Here we see that even after exile, Israel still struggles to be who God called them to be. We see who they are, but what do we learn about God’s character in these examples?

Liberating Lesson

We do not sin in isolation.” This statement is applicable to everyone, but it is particularly impactful for those who are leaders. History has shown that one leader with a bent toward injustice, evil, and selfish ambition can have a devastating effect on the masses. Consider Andrew Jackson’s Indian Removal Act, which set the stage for the Trail of Tears. However, history has also shown that one leader, such as Alexander Crummell, who served as a missionary in Liberia for twenty years and planted the first independent black Episcopal church in Washington DC, can spiritually impact generations to come. God told the priests to “make up your minds to

honor my name.” We get to choose what type of impact we will have. It all begins with a sincere commitment to follow and obey the Lord.

Application for Activation

Reflect on a few leaders in your life, past and present. How have their actions impacted your life—positively and negatively? Identify what you learned about being a godly (or ungodly) leader from them.

Then evaluate your relationship with the Lord and influence over others—at home, work, church, and so on. How would God describe your current relationship with Him and others? More like the zealous Levitical priests of old, or like the resentful priests in Malachi?

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Malachi 2:1–9; 3:5–6

Malachi used a rhetorical, interactive style of writing designed to have a persuasive effect on his rebellious audience. Each of his six messages begin with a serious charge against these postexile Jews who had returned to Judah after their seventy-year captivity in Babylon. True to his call as God’s messenger, Malachi presented six charges against the post-exilic community. However, they challenged each of his commands with a sarcastic rebuttal question: (1) charged to respond to God’s love, they rebut, “How has He loved us?” (1:2–5); (2) charged to honor God as He deserves, they rebut, “How have we ever shown Him contempt?” (1:6–2:9); (3) charged to be faithful to God, they rebut, “Why doesn’t God accept our worship?” (2:10–16); (4) charged that they have wearied the Lord, they rebut, “How have we wearied the Lord?” (2:17– 3:6); (5) charged with robbing God, they rebut, “How have we ever robbed You?” (3:7–12); and (6) charged with saying terrible things about God, they rebut, “What have we said against God?” (3:13–4:3). In their rebuttal, they try to claim that the charges are false, but Malachi proves in his persuasive messages that the charges are indeed true. The expected response is confession and repentance because there is hope in the God who keeps His covenant even when His people do not.

In spite of God’s willingness to forgive, these Israelites were indifferent and resentful, but why? Although they had returned to their native land (538 BC), they were still under the political domination of the Persians. These former captives reconstructed the Temple (515 BC), but lacking the type of resources Solomon had, this Temple was but a mere shadow of Solomon’s exquisite Temple. Life was difficult. Harvests were poor and subject to locust damage (3:11). In short, they felt that God did not deliver on the covenant blessings that He had promised them, and their behavior exhibited several indications of hidden resentment, specifically stagnant worship, lack of praise, blemished offerings, defensive responses to correction, and disparaging remarks about God.

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

Here, Malachi's focus is on the priests. The priests are from the tribe of Levi, the third son of Jacob. However, only the descendants of Levi's great-grandson Aaron, the first high priest, can legitimately serve as priests and offer sacrifices on the altar on behalf of the people. As intermediaries, the priests represented the people before a holy God through sacrifice and instructed the people in the Word and the will of God. In so doing, they played a crucial role in the spiritual life of the nation. But now, instead of instructing the people, the priests were the ones receiving instruction, a command from the Lord through the Lord's messenger, Malachi. This rebuke was necessary because the priests, who knew better, were accepting blind, crippled, and diseased animals from the people and offering them as sacrifices (1:7–10). This was in direct defiance of the regulations in the book of Leviticus, which served as a handbook for the priests for offering sacrifices. The regulations specifically stated, "Whosoever offereth a sacrifice unto the LORD, it shall be perfect to be accepted; there shall be no blemish therein . . . Ye shall not offer unto the LORD that which is bruised, or crushed, or broken, or cut" (Leviticus 22:21, 24).

God was so displeased with their conduct that He gave the priests a severe warning. If they refused to listen and make the appropriate changes, God would curse them. Curses, which are hardships and difficulties, were nothing new to Israel. In fact, curses for disobedience to God's Law were embedded in the Mosaic Covenant. The covenant of Law was the means by which God governed His people Israel. Blessings were the incentive to obey (Deuteronomy 28:1–14), while curses were the deterrent to disobedience (vv. 16–68). The priests were not exempt from the Law, and God was warning them that their violation of their sacred duty to lead the people in proper worship would result in curses. In fact, even the very blessings they received would be cursed. Indeed, because of their hearts' condition, the curse was already in effect. The curse was so complete, even the priestly blessings they pronounced on the people would be cursed (Numbers 6:22–27).

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.

Because the priests dishonored God, God would in turn dishonor the priests as well as their descendants. He had already announced that the priests would be cursed for their refusal to honor Him with proper sacrifices (2:2), but that was only part of the consequences for their sinful behavior. God now focuses their attention on the additional dramatic action He would take against them with the phrase "behold [me]" (Heb. henni, heh-NIE). In other words, look and take notice of what I will do. Not only will the current priests be punished for their misdeeds, but their seed (Heb. zera', ZEHrah), their descendants, would suffer an even sterner punishment. To corrupt (Heb. ga'ar, gaw-AR) is to rebuke or reprove. The manner in which this will occur is by spreading "dung upon your faces." Dung, or the excrement from the sacrificial animals, was normally burned outside the camp along with other unused parts of the sacrifice (Leviticus 4:11). In other words, this was a symbolic and graphic way for God to announce that He would make the priests unclean, therefore unable to serve, and remove them from the priesthood just as the dung was removed and burned. The stated penalty for the priests was severe for the purpose of getting them to repent so that God could restore them. Once restored, they could honor God once again by leading the people in true worship with acceptable sacrifices. These severe words of warning were unmistakably from God. It is important to note that even in the midst of judgment, a gracious, loving God was still reaching out to His rebellious priests, letting them know that the ultimate purpose of His judgment was redemption and restoration, not just punishment. He wanted to purify the priesthood so that His covenant with Levi could continue. It is the same with us today. As a royal priesthood we are charged with the responsibility to proclaim the praises of God (1 Peter 2:9) to those who are still trapped in a dark world of sin. We are charged with offering our bodies as a living sacrifice to Him (Romans 12:2). That is simply our reasonable service, nothing extra, nothing extraordinary. And yet, we often fail to fulfill this solemn duty. So we too are admonished to repent, to remember that God has honored us by making our bodies His holy temple, so

that we are to glorify God by giving Him our complete selves—body, soul, mind, and strength—as a worthy sacrifice.

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.

This covenant was made after Israel was freed from bondage in Egypt and camped at the foot of Mt. Sinai. After spending forty days and nights on the mountain receiving the Law of God for the people, Moses returned to find that they had committed idolatry by worshiping the golden calf that Aaron, his brother and high priest, had made (Exodus 32). Moses was so angry he broke the tablets of stone with the Ten Commandments and gave the command for those on the Lord's side to remove themselves as a sign of their fidelity to the Lord. The Levites obeyed. As a result, God set them apart as the priestly tribe with these words: "Today you have ordained yourselves for the service of the LORD, for you obeyed him even though it meant killing your own sons and brothers" (from Exodus 32:29, NLT). Thus God joined Himself to Levi through the covenant He made with him declaring that "no Israelites except priests or Levites may approach the Tabernacle. If they come too near, they will be judged guilty and will die" (Numbers 18:22). The covenant with Levi was for life and peace. It brought spiritual life because the priests offered the blood of the animal sacrifices to God for the sin of the people. As a result of receiving forgiveness of sin, it brought peace with God, which resulted in the peace of God.

As God's representatives, the priests were the messengers of the Lord, tasked with the responsibility "to teach your regulations to Jacob; to give your instructions to Israel" (Deuteronomy 33:10). When the lips of the priests teach the truth of God with integrity, then the people will come and seek out the priests to hear the Word. Pastors and teachers are similarly tasked with that solemn responsibility today. They must teach and preach God's Word, not opinion or tradition, but rightly divide the Word of truth and then be an example before the people. When teachers and preachers live out the truth, it increases the possibility that the people will follow their example.

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.

The priests were mandated to teach the Law to the people of Israel (Deuteronomy 33:10). As teachers, each priest was to be God's messenger. However, since they were not giving true instruction, they were rebuked by the prophet. The priests' teaching caused many to stumble because they themselves had departed from the way. Telling the people that defiled and diseased animals were acceptable for sacrifice violated the covenant God made with the Levites and the warning they were given to be held responsible for any covenant breaking. Because of their offenses, the priests were despised and humiliated before all the people. They suffered public disgrace because they disobeyed and despised the honor they had been given. Only the priests, the descendants of Aaron, could approach the awesome presence of God to offer sacrifices on behalf of the people. Instead of gratitude for that honor, they demeaned it by offering defiled sacrifices.

3:5 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.

Israel's judgment would not be limited to the Levites but would include the whole nation. Usually when God says He will "come near," it is for blessing (Genesis 18:1–14; Exodus 33:12–23; 1 Kings 3:3–9). But in this

instance, God comes near to His people for judgment. Judgment is the word mishpat (Heb. meesh-POT), which also means justice. Justice speaks of the act of deciding a case and then issuing a verdict with the associated penalty that is required in order to restore order (Isaiah 42:1–4). Notice the unusual nature of this particular court case brought against the people (3:5). God is not only the judge, He is also the witness against the people and the prosecutor who brought the charges. His verdict is that every aspect of the society is guilty: (1) the family is afflicted with adulterers, (2) the workplace is infected with employers who cheat employees of their wages, (3) the community leaders oppress the widows and orphans and mistreat strangers (immigrants), (4) the courts are corrupted with perjurers (“false swearers,” KJV), and (5) sorcerers in the society practice evil with the aid of evil spirits. The overarching charge is that all of these transgressions occur because the people do not fear the Lord. But will this judgment bring about the end of Israel? Will the people be consumed by the refiner’s fire (3:2)? No! The descendants of Jacob will not be destroyed because of God’s covenant promise to the nation of Israel. God’s Word, like Himself, is immutable, and that is the basis for Israel’s hope (Deuteronomy 4:31, Ezekiel 36:22–32). We too have the same basis for hope whenever we mess up and go astray. Our Covenant-Keeping God is true to His Word and will forgive and cleanse us if we but confess (1 John 1:9).

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Offer Sacrifice of Thanksgiving to God
(Psalm 50:1–15)

TUESDAY

Bring Acceptable Offerings to the Lord
(Leviticus 22:17–25)

WEDNESDAY

God's Name Is Great among Nations
(Malachi 1:11–14)

THURSDAY

Be Faithful to One Another
(Malachi 2:10–16)

FRIDAY

Messenger of Judgment Coming
(Malachi 2:17–3:4)

SATURDAY

God's Blessings and Delights Await
(Malachi 3:7–12)

SUNDAY

Leading in Troubled Times
(Malachi 2:1–9; 3:5–6)