

Corrupting the Plan

September 27, 2020

Malachi 2:5-9

I trust you will bear with me this morning as I attempt to go about my job while at the same time complying with health department guidelines. At the direction of our leaders, I am isolating myself in my office between services without greeting people as today is the last day of my 14-day precautionary quarantine. Tomorrow, if nothing changes I can go back to normal. Both Joan and I feel fine and have had NO symptoms of the COVID virus. But for today, this is what I have to do. Thank you to staff and especially Pastor Brant for filling for me and preaching in my place last Sunday.

We pick up our study of the book of Malachi in chapter 2. As I have already tried to make clear, this great little book is packed full of stinging rebukes against the people of God and especially the clergy over their wrong perspective concerning their relationship with God and particularly over their worship. God is not pleased with them and uses His prophet, Malachi to deliver this rebuke.

As I hope might be clear, this is a very strange passage for a pastor to preach. This is God chastising His clergy. I am to preach this passage as part of the whole counsel of God. I am preaching it to you, the people who sit weekly under the preaching of the word by me and my brothers, the clergy. But the text is a rebuke to people like me. So, I am really preaching out loud to myself! And the subject matter is in part the clergy's unwillingness to preach convincingly about the dangers of sin, the importance of worship. So, I have to preach strongly, convincingly about preaching the dangers of sin and the importance of worship. So, know that with every word I am preaching this morning, I am really preaching to myself and my fellow preachers. For context, I could see the book of Malachi as a great core text to preach at a gathering of pastors and leaders of the church. That context would best fit the text.

I am going to back up a bit and read from the beginning of chapter 2 as it is all really one thought, but know that our study this morning will focus on vv. 5-9. Hear the Word of the Lord. READ

Main Point: The role of clergy is to by word and deed faithfully convey the whole truth of God.

That is our charge, and it is a heavy charge indeed. As I said the last time I preached, it is one thing if I do or say wrong things. But if I do that in my role as a pastor, as a leader of God's people, I am responsible for the wrong conclusions drawn by those under my

leadership. If I tell you, “Oh, it’s good enough for God,” and it’s not, then your sin becomes my sin. I am responsible for your taking seriously what I teach. As we will see in the text over the next weeks, if I call good wrong and wrong good, I am responsible when you believe me. This is why the book of James warns in 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.”

So, you can see why this is an especially difficult sermon for me to preach to me with you listening in. And yet, I am also preaching it to you. Each of us has areas of our lives where we are leading people. We are all teachers and youth workers and Bible study leaders and “social influencers.” So, I am preaching to you, too! Hear the Word of the Lord! (2parts)

I. The Plan: Live uprightly and challenge others to do the same. Vv.5-7

Malachi uses Levi as the model of what was God’s original plan for the priesthood. I don’t think of it as the actual person, Levi the son of Jacob, but as an idealized person. When Moses blessed the tribes of Israel at the end of his life, he dealt with them in this way. He referred to the tribe of Levi in singular terms, as one man (Deut. 33:8-11). That’s how I see it here. Levi (the idealized priest of the plan) got it right. And yet, I hope it will become clear that as much as Levi is the model, there is One who even better fits the mold of what God’s priest ought to be like. We know Him as our High Priest: Jesus. I sincerely believe this text is intended by God to point our thinking to Jesus. After all, no other human person could live up to the expectations of this text.

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.

I remind you that Levi’s name was mentioned back in v.4. Notice here the use of the word “covenant.” God had made an agreement, a promise, a longstanding relationship between Himself and a group of people, a line of people, the sons of Levi. They would faithfully oversee the worship of God’s people and He would provide for their needs. They would faithfully represent Him to the people and faithfully represent the people before Him. That arrangement was designed to go on for generations.

It was designed with a purpose: to convey to God’s people His life, His peace. As they faithfully fulfilled their duties, the people would be led to remain in good relation with Him. They would hear His Word proclaimed, worship as He designed it, be led into a proper perspective on God, on themselves, on what it means to be in relationship with

Him. Doing so faithfully would lead to peace and life for the people of God. The system was designed to work.

And we see here that Levi himself had the proper perspective. He got it. He was in awe of his God, he feared only his God, the Lord of hosts. He did not fear the wrath of people, or the possibility of lack of provision. He trusted the Lord to keep his end of the covenant. That is how it was designed to work.

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.

He taught the Word of God faithfully, truthfully. His life matched up to his words. Levi was a man of integrity. And we see that he was effective. As a fellow clergyman, this is a powerful statement, “he turned many from iniquity.” He spoke the Word, he spoke it faithfully, convincingly, powerfully, effectively. The life he lived backed up what he spoke. I don’t know about you, but this is not making me feel all warm and fuzzy inside. It seems to me that all we brothers of the cloth fall short of this. Either Levi was one remarkable man, or the text is really setting us up for someone else. I don’t remember back to Levi or any other former priest as some great man who got everything right! I think I see something else here.

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.

Here, we see the reference to the ideal priest put in the form of principle. This is what it should be like. He should be careful with the truth, well regarded and respected by the people, considered to be the messenger (the Malachi) of the LORD of hosts. This is what God expects from every person who stands before people and preaches the Word of God, teaches the Word of God, leads the people of God into worship. This was the plan!

But those of us who hold such positions know that we fall short of this. We too are sheep, needing to be confronted by the Word of God, challenged to turn away from sin. We too are sinners who sin, needing the constant forgiving power of God in order to be right with Him. We too need to be convinced that what God says is THE truth, that God means what He says. We too need help understanding the Word of God just as much as every other person. And we know all of this with the weight of the possibility of leading other people astray. When we fail, others fail. And when they fail, that failure is in part accounted to us. What a burden!

Now I don’t want to take away from the weight of this passage, and we will come back to it in just a few minutes when we get to v.8, but it seems to me that there is only

One who truly meets the description of this passage. There is only One who faithfully, truthfully, always, powerfully, convincingly, effectively conveyed the Word of God. When He spoke, it was the LORD of hosts speaking. He knew the Word of God on a level no one else could claim. He taught the teachers...as a young boy. And His words perfectly matched up with His life. He walked the walk. His life was spotless. Nothing evil, nothing mistaken came out of His mouth. He never led anyone astray. Many people turned from their sin because of Him. He was the perfect priest, and his name wasn't Levi. His name was Jesus. Yes, I am firmly convinced that any student of Scripture stumbling on this passage has to read it and think of Jesus. He and He alone fulfills what is written here about what it means to be a faithful priest. He fits the mold. Indeed, the mold was given to point us to Him. As the author of Hebrews puts it, we have a great high priest!

2. The Corruption: Live your own way and cause your people to stumble. Vv. 8-9

So, Malachi lays out the model, gives it in both principle and by example. And then he gets out the sledge hammer and lets the priests have it. Here we have a segment of his indictment of the priests of his day.

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,

They have left the path, the way. They have decided to go their own way. They have made the determination that their own way was better than God's way. Their way was good enough, more efficient, more considerate of others, more pleasant to listen to. They decided that their own way made better sense than God's way. Their message was better for the people than God's message.

Now, pause right there. If this was all that it said, we would already know where it ends up. When we go astray, when we leave the path, the narrow way, we know the result. To quote one of you, "It can't be good!" Oh the arrogance of going our own way! It means that we think we know better than God! It is the opposite of fear and standing in awe of His name. It is trying to make a name for yourself at God's expense. And yet, we all do it all the time. We all, like sheep, go our own way.

But here, it is compounded in the devastation of its consequences because these are not just sheep but under shepherds of the sheep. The ones going astray are the ones leading the people. Consequently, many followers were led astray, led into sin, given a sense of complacency about their sin, told they were right when in fact they were wrong, or told they were wrong when in fact they were right. The consequences of these priests' sin were

multiplied. Instead of leading people toward God, they were leading people away from God. They were following their leader, but their leader wasn't following God!

Notice the terminology here, "caused many to stumble." Instead of lighting up the path, they were actually causing them to trip and fall. Causing to stumble is worse than doing nothing at all. How does Jesus put it in Matthew 18:6? "but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea." I think God is serious about this whole "causes to stumble" thing!

Not only did they cause to stumble, but here we see that they "corrupted the covenant." They ruined the plan. They caused to putrefy the beautiful thing that God had set up. The actions of the clergy had destroyed the whole system God had set up. In fact, it is so bad that God is going to put it in terms of divorce later in the chapter. They have defiled this covenant relationship God has had with them and His people. In other words, this is no small thing. This is a really big thing. You can be wrong about a lot of things, but this is not one to get wrong. God is serious about worship and about leading people astray. He has no patience for those who do so.

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."

He has taken away the honor that should be due the faithful leaders of God's people and replaced it with shame, with disgust, with being brought low. Instead of being lifted up in honor, they are going to be brought low in disgust.

Then we see another part of the problem, they were showing partiality. They were tailoring their message to their audience. They were showing favoritism to people they liked, people who liked them, people who perhaps could grant them favor. Once more, every person in this position understands the temptation to show favoritism. We all want to be liked. We all want people to support our priorities and projects. I don't know many of my brothers in the pulpit who want all their people to be upset with them. When your job and income come from the donations of those you serve, it is easy to justify favoritism. And yet, we are called to preach the truth, the whole truth, sometimes the hard truth, fearing only the God of Scripture rather than fearing those who call Him Lord. We are called to say things that will not always please those we serve. "Here's the hard truth you're not going to like. Now please donate to this organization." Can you see the dilemma? Can you understand why so many water down the truth, fail to speak out about sin, take popular positions rather than hard positions?

Once more, we see how this plays itself out even in the church in the New Testament. Accusations against an elder are held to a high standard. But unrepentant sin by such leaders is to be dealt with in the strongest of ways. Such a leader is to be publicly shamed as an example for others. As they should have been an example of good, so they are to be an example in wrong. Can you see why the warning is given not to rush into being a leader among God's people?

So, the warning from Yahweh here is directed toward those who lead God's people in worship. He tells them what they should be doing: faithfully conveying the Word of God in word and deed, fearing only the God of Scripture who has set them apart for this role. Instead, they have strayed from God's plan, concerned more for their popularity than approval from God. Instead of leading people to turn away from sin, they are causing their people to stumble. As you can imagine, God is not very happy with them!

What do we do with this? Do we see this text play out in our day? Of course we do. There are many, many people who stand in front of the people of God and water down what God says, who preach for popularity rather than faithfully. And as a result, clergy are not held in high regard. I think we are down around used car salesmen, just above politicians. No, the reputation of clergy is pretty much shot.

So, for guys like me, you preach this passage to yourself. But as I've already suggested, most of us are in this position in some area of life. We are all influencers. So what should we do? We check ourselves to see if we are calling sin, sin. We make sure we are faithfully conveying the truth of God and not some watered down version, especially concerning sin and the need for salvation through Jesus alone. We contemplate the fact that people are watching us as much as listening to us. In short, we take seriously our responsibility, knowing that God will hold us accountable.

And for those of us who do not see ourselves as spiritual leaders, we need to be constantly checking what we are hearing with what the Word of God says. When things don't match up, it is our duty to investigate and bring it to the attention of our leaders. And then we need to make it known to our leaders that we appreciate it when we hear the truth even if it hurts. If you want a bold, fearless preacher, encourage him when he takes risks. And let it be known that you expect no favors, that your support is constant.

So, if this is the Word of God, what will be different about our lives?

- 1) We will take seriously any opportunities we have to lead and teach God's people.
- 2) We will watch our lives to make sure they match our teaching.
- 3) We will listen to all teaching with intent, checking whoever it is that we listen to against Scripture.
- 4) We will encourage bold preaching, especially when it comes to calling out sin.

5) We will give thanks for Jesus, who actually fulfills God's plan for being a faithful priest.