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Compromising the Ministry of the Word

Malachi 2:1-2a

In 2 Timothy 2 we read this call.

2 Timothy 2:15, "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth."

This is a command we all can take as addressed to ourselves. That being the case, what is involved in “handling accurately the word of truth”?

Malachi 2 is addressed to the priests who at that time were entrusted with the ministry of God’s Word — a ministry which they were compromising. Accordingly, while the text lends itself to the pulpit ministry, all of us can derive personal application from it.

When something becomes mechanical, much of the significance associated with it becomes routine. The irony is that when we do “the routine” long enough, we tend to impose value on the routine in order to make it something more than just routine. For example, God instituted the Sabbath at the dawn of creation as a vehicle of fellowship and communion with His people. On the seventh day, He would take care of the many obligations and concerns which rest upon them the previous six days of the week! That would free man up to spend a day fellowshiping with God and His people... and so being refreshed in Him (cf. Exodus 23:12; Leviticus 16:31; Isaiah 58:13-14; Psalm 92:4, 10, 12-15). Yet in time, what did God’s people do with this day? Its observance became rote, mindless, and so mechanical such that they inverted the purpose and significance of this day.

They now were servants of the Sabbath. This occurred during the intertestamental period where, in response to the exile, Israel understood that their deportation was the result of their failure as a Theocracy to follow God’s word. Accordingly, that they might be found pleasing to the Lord (they related to God on the basis of their performance) they noted that the word “work” is found thirty-nine times in the Old Testament. So, they squared that number and so came up with 1,521 man-made laws pertaining to what they could and could not do on the Sabbath.

And so rather than understanding that God ordained the Sabbath for His people that they might refresh themselves in the Lord, they believed that they had been saved in part to uphold the Sabbath (cf. Mark 2:27)! It was by this mean they would be sure to secure God’s continuing favor. And so, missing the point of the Sabbath, they transformed it into something God never intended it be!

And that is exactly what was going on in Malachi’s day, roughly 150 years following Israel’s return to the Promised Land. The temple had long been rebuilt; its services reinstated. The city walls had been erected such that God’s people now lived in relative safety. Yet gone were the glory days when Israel was something, the temple radiated with the shekinah glory of God, and where God’s people lived in wealth and plenty under a Davidic King. And that is when it happened! Their relationship with God became rote, common place, even boring!

Now choose the era in Redemptive history when this occurs and you will find that ones relationship with God becomes man-centered/self-serving, with its practices, responsibilities, and beliefs revolving around man!

That was the state of God's people to whom the Lord sent the prophet Malachi. Now at the outset of this prophesy of rebuke and warning, God wanted His people to understand that they were NOT under condemnation. RATHER all that we read in this prophecy was the result of God's love for them! Recall the opening exhortation.

Malachi 1:1-2a, "The oracle of the word of the LORD to Israel through Malachi. 'I have loved you,' says the LORD..."

Accordingly, we are to take everything we read from this point on NOT as the words of an angry God, BUT of a God who loves His people. As such, in spite of the strong language used in this Old Testament epistle, we must take none of it as condemnation! All of it is the overflow of the love and goodness of God who will NOT endure sinful thinking or living on the part of His children (cf. Hebrews 12:7).

Malachi 2 is directed at those responsible for the teaching and pastoral care of God's people at the time, the Priests.

Malachi 2:1, "And now [based on the previous exhortation] this commandment is for you, O priests."

Recall in the previous exhortation God addressed the coldness of His people's worship (Malachi 1:6-14). And yet, in our text today we come to a fuller understanding of why their worship was compromised. It was because of the Priests! They were charged with instructing God's people — a calling which in their coldness toward the Lord predictably became incredibly man-centered!

Accordingly, the focus of our text today is on the Ministry of God's Word — the Pulpit — which the priests had compromised. With that, notice the ultimate Issue when it comes to a compromised pulpit.

The Ultimate Issue

Malachi 2:2, "If you do not listen, and if you do not take it to heart to give honor to My name,' says the LORD of hosts..."

When it comes to a faithful pulpit, this is

1. The key,
2. The cornerstone,
3. The Ultimate Issue

Accordingly, when we think of the preaching ministry of a church, the issue is NOT these:

- Am I pleased?
- Do I like what I'm hearing?
- Does the pulpit stimulate, motivate, or inspire me?

BUT is God honored? Now the "weight" of this is seen by the emphasis that God lays here on His character. He is "the Lord of hosts"!

This language speaks of the majesty, power, and authority of the Lord. Both His divine name, יהוה (*Yhvh*) (which lays stress on God's self-sustaining, eternal Person) AND the expression "Lord of Hosts" (which speaks of a host of armies [specifically here, the angelic host]) lay emphasis on God's greatness! And so, we must understand that any and every exercise of the Ministry of God's Word is done ever mindful that we are dealing with the word of Almighty God! Accordingly, the bottom line when it comes to any sermon, Sunday school, Bible study, family devotion, and quiet time is: Was God honored? Was God pleased?

In John Piper's book "The Supremacy of God in Preaching" John Piper wrote this:

Is this what people take away from worship nowadays - a sense of God? A note of sovereign grace, a theme of panoramic glory, the grand object of God's infinite Being? Do they enter for one hour in the week... into an atmosphere of the holiness of God, which leaves its aroma upon their lives all week long?

Cotton Mather, who ministered in New England three hundred years ago, said, 'The great design and intention of the office of a Christian preacher [is] to restore the throne and dominion of God in the souls of men.' (Piper, 2004, p. 22)

What is God's point here! The ultimate Issue when it comes to any pulpit is: Does it honor the glory and majesty of God? Is God well-pleased with it?

This is so important. The main reason men wash out of a pulpit ministry is discouragement. They preach and teach and caution and cajole with seemingly little fruit or success. In fact, far from fruit, they get as a thanks for their labor criticism and attack from the very ones they would seek to bless. We see it in Jeremiah who frequently sought release from the divine obligation that rested on him on account of discouragement:

Jeremiah 20:8, "I proclaim violence and destruction, because for me the word of the LORD has resulted in reproach and derision all day long."

We see this in the life of Isaiah:

Isaiah 49:4, "But I said, 'I have toiled in vain, I have spent My strength for nothing and vanity.'"

If you are going to the word of God to receive or give a blessing to man, eventually you will be discouraged to the point of giving up! That is why the key for any man who stays long in a pulpit ministry is the conviction that his audience each week ultimately is the Lord... it is to God He looks either for rebuke or blessing! Never man!

And because it is to God that he looks, because his work is *Coram Deo* (before the face of God) he must stand before man as one who himself is moved by the word of God. That brings us to a caution when it comes to the ministry of the word.

A Caution

Malachi 2:2b, "'If you do not listen, and if you do 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 blessings¹; and indeed, I have cursed them already, because you are not taking it to heart.'"

From this rebuke, what do we conclude about the priests of Malachi's day? They were NOT living under the word of God! They were NOT allowing the glory and greatness of God to transform them through His word! This is the first and foremost task of any student of Scripture — to heed the word of God *THEMSELVES*.

Hebrews 4:2, "For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, BECAUSE it was not united by faith in those who heard."

Listen to Paul's exhortation to Timothy:

1 Timothy 4:16a, "Pay close attention to yourself and [then] to your teaching [your doctrine]..."

Ezra 7:10, "For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD, and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel."

In fact, this emphasis is found in Malachi from the very start.

Malachi 1:1, "The oracle of the word of the LORD to Israel through Malachi."

Recall the word for "oracle" is the word for a "burden." Family of God, let us understand that as we approach the word it first and foremost is a burden/wight that rests upon each and everyone of us to believe, submit to, and then share or teach it to

others. The order here is very important! It begins with our own submission to the word!

Yet it was at this point the priests in Malachi's day fell short. The word of God was NOT viewed as a charge to them, BUT for others. It was as Paul exhorted the teachers of his day:

Romans 2:21-22, "You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that one should not steal, do you steal? You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?"

If you are an officer in Christ's church, a Sunday school teacher, a parent, and one who would seek to be a blessing to others in Christ, the first and foremost call that we have is ourselves to sit under the word of God, to sup upon it, and ourselves to be renewed by it!

Now, what happens if we do NOT heed this call? What happens if we become lazy listeners or fall into the habit of taking the word of God as an end to itself (being satisfied simply with the acquisition of knowledge)? Listen to what Malachi told the priests:

Malachi 2:2b, "If you do not listen, and if you do 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; and indeed, I have cursed them already, because you are not taking it to heart."

Recall that the wording here is Covenantal Language which in the context of a "curse" (which it is here) speaks NOT of God's wrath or condemnation, BUT fruitlessness and so leanness of soul (cf. Psalm 106:15). If we ourselves fail to submit to the word of God, the result will be dryness or emptiness in our walk. That's the curse! And yet, it wouldn't only be the individual servant of the Lord... BUT this "curse" would impact those around him.

Malachi 2:3, "Behold, I am going to rebuke your offspring², and I will spread refuse on your faces^{3,4}, the refuse of your feasts; and you will be taken away with it."

Notice the word for "offspring" is one and the same as the word for "seed" (that you plant in the ground). Many take this literally and so as a reference to the destroyed crops which were plaguing the people of God at this time on account of the drought. This would have been a curse to the priests because their livelihood came from the gifts of the people who were farmers. If the land was cursed/fruitless, the priests would suffer greatly.

However, the word could also refer to one's children. If that is the case, then the "curse" of a dry and miserable walk would spread to their children in accord with Exodus 34:7 where the "sins of the father" spread to their children. This is what Richard Baxter was getting at when he said this:

When I let my heart grow cold, my preaching is cold; and when it is confused, my preaching is confused; and so I can oft observe also in the best of my hearers, that when I have grown cold in preaching, that they have grown cold too; and the next prayers which I have heard from them have been too like my preaching. (Baxter, 1999, pp. 61-62)

Some have suggested that there is a double entendre here in that if the land was cursed such that the priests couldn't eat, their children likewise would go hungry. Regardless of how you take this, notice that there is a consequence (not a punishment) that comes when the minister of God's word does NOT himself sit under God's word so as to live it, believe it, and so appropriate in his own life. At minimum, the result is a dryness in their walk... a distancing from God who is the "fount of every blessing" (Ephesians 1:3)!

What then is the call and so the responsibility that rests on preacher (or any student of Scripture) when it comes to the word of God? We'll address that question next time!

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End Note(s)

¹ "I will curse your blessings has been understood in two ways. On the one hand 'blessings' are interpreted to mean the material resources, perquisites, which came the way of the priests as recipients of the people's tithes (Numbers 18:21), and on the other hand as the words of blessing which it was the prerogative of the priests to pronounce (Numbers 6:24-26). In either case the blessings would recoil as a curse upon them..." (Baldwin, 1972, p. 252)

² "Many modern translations take this as a reference to the priests' offspring, which is plausible; however, given the references to literal seed in the covenant curses of Leviticus 26:16 and Deuteronomy 28:38 (especially combined with 'rebuke' in Deuteronomy 28:20), it seems more likely that agricultural disaster is the primary judgement in view here (compare Hag. 2:19). A failure of the crops would also affect the priests, since their income depended in large measure on the tithes and offerings of agricultural produce brought by the people to the temple. There may also be a play on words here, however, in that this disaster will have ongoing effects on the priests' families (their 'seed') as well." (Duguid, 2010, pp. 208-209)

³ "The offal from sacrificial animals was to be removed from the sanctuary and burnt (Exodus

29:14; Leviticus 4:11, etc.), but so revolting to God were those who offered to him sacrifices of no value that they and their offerings were to end up on the dung-heap, excluded from God's presence. It is hardly surprising that the Targum dispensed with the metaphor and translated 'I will make visible on your faces the shame of your crimes'. The imagery was boldly uncomplimentary to those whose birth and training had set them apart for sacred duties, and was no doubt resented. The invective of the eighth-century prophets against the cultus (Isaiah 1:11–15; Hosea 4:6–10; Amos 4:4, 5; 5:21–23; Micah 6:6–8) was polite by comparison." (Baldwin, 1972, p. 253)

⁴ "This disgrace is graphically described by the disgusting (and defiling) metaphor of the priests having their faces covered with 'offal'—that is, the internal organs of animals and their excretory contents. This term always refers to a waste by-product of the sacrificial process, and this would be especially plentiful at the three great annual 'feasts', on account of the vast numbers of sacrifices offered. Their 'faces', which were supposed to be lifted to the Lord in prayer, would instead be spread with this defiling muck, a vivid symbol of the total rejection of their ministry by the Lord. Instead of being accepted in the Lord's presence, they would be unceremoniously carried out and dumped on the dungheap with the defiling detritus of the sacrificial procedure. It would be no more than their lack of respect for the Lord deserved." (Duguid, 2010, p. 209)