



BETHEL
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MINISTRY OF THE WORD

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Compromising the Ministry of the Word, 2

Malachi 2:1-9

In 2 Timothy 2:15 we are called to “handle accurately the word of truth” which is the book in our hands. And the passage before us helps us to understand what is involved in this.

You know the account in Genesis 22 where Abraham is called by God to offer his only

son to the Lord as a sacrifice. If it wasn't for the Lord stopping Abraham, we know the patriarch would have gone through with it. And that is incredible faith! Yet we must see that it wasn't blind faith. For we learn from God's commentary on this event that Abraham did what he did because, "He considered that God is able to raise men even from the dead..." (Hebrews 11:19a)

Abraham did what he did NOT because he was so devout or godly, BUT because God is so great! And God in His grace opened Abraham's eyes to behold that greatness to a limited degree — God can raise the dead!

That is the first element when it comes to "handling God's Word accurately:" recognizing that the reason God has given us the Bible is so that we might come to a greater understanding of who God is, which is the essence of "honoring Him"!

Malachi 2:1-2a, "'And now, this commandment is for you, O priests. 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..."

If eternal life is defined as "knowing God" (John 17:3) it stands to reason that the ultimate issue when it comes to the ministry of the Word is the demonstration of God's person and work to His people that we might honor Him and so know Him! That is what is behind Moses' plea in Exodus 33:18, "I pray Thee, show me Thy glory!"

So Christian, if your objective in reading God's word is a pick me up, a fun fact, inspiration, or any other man-centered objective, you are misusing God's word. It was given that we might come to know, honor, worship, and so love this Being called God!

The priests of Malachi's day missed this. Their walk and ministry had become rote/mechanical. And when this occurs, religion becomes incredibly man-centered- where the focus is on honoring ourselves or man, rather than God! And yet, it didn't stop there, which is why Malachi secondly gave them a caution when it came to the ministry of the word, vv. 2b-3. God's word has been given NOT ONLY to reveal the glory and greatness of God to us, BUT ALSO to transform the believer into the image of Christ!

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 we saw the need for us to live under the word of God and so to allow the glory and greatness of God to transform us as we read/study God's word. This is the first and foremost task of any teacher of Scripture- to heed the word of God *THEMSELVES* (cf. Ezra 7:10)! Now, if we fall into the habit of just reading/studying it

mechanically, eventually there will be dire consequences in our walk. And what is that? A dryness which NOT ONLY will settle on our walk with God, BUT could also infect our children.

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. Psalms 106:15; Hosea 2:6-7). 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 which, based on v. 3, could also negatively impact our children’s walk with God (cf. Exodus 34:7)!

Recall the words of Richard Baxter:

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)

So “handling God’s word accurately” involves the calling for you and me to labor and strive to submit ourselves to the glorious teaching of grace!

That brings us to the formal responsibility that rests on a preacher (or any student of Scripture) when it comes to the word of God. Notice, what our calling involves.

Malachi 2:4, “‘Then you will know that I have sent this commandment to you, that My covenant² may continue with Levi³,’ says the LORD of hosts.”

We are going to return to this at the end, so I’ll not make any comment now other than to say that behind the Ministry of God’s Word is a divinely ordained end which ought to govern our understanding of how the word of God is handled accurately.

That being said, from vv. 5-7 we learn how God Intended the ministry of the Word to be executed. Notice that it begins with the horizontal telos of all biblical instruction: The Growth of God’s People in Grace.

Malachi 2:5a, “My covenant with him was one of life and peace...”

The “life” and “peace” here are in reference to the people of God and their walk with

Him. It is as Paul said in...

1 Timothy 1:5, “But the goal of our instruction is LOVE from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.”

This is what we are after with every sermon, Sunday school, family devotion, pastoral visit, fellowship gathering, and quiet time. We want others to come to a fuller understanding of the love of God such that they love Him in return. And so, the goal is NOT the acquisition of knowledge, rebuking people, inspiring them, or even entertaining them! The goal is that they come to know and so love Christ more!

This brings us to the vertical Telos which we’ve already discussed — that we come to a fuller understanding of the greatness of God.

Malachi 2:5b, “My covenant with him was one of life and peace and I gave them to him as an object of reverence; so he revered Me, and stood in awe of My name.”

Truly, all our teaching, encouragement, and instruction must come as the overflow of a life which is in awe of God! Again, as we approach this book, we must understand that we are dealing with the words of an awesome Being! Accordingly, it is His greatness which must rest heavy upon us as we sit beneath His word.

A third element of the ministry of God’s Word is its faithful proclamation .

Malachi 2:6a, “True instruction was in his mouth, and unrighteousness was not found on his lips...”-

The only way a pulpit can turn people back to God is if it first is faithful to the text itself! Accordingly, there is NO place in a faithful pulpit for politics, psychology, social commentaries, personal agendas, or counseling. The purpose of a godly pulpit is the faithful and true exposition of the word of God!

Malachi 2:7, “For the lips of a priest should preserve knowledge⁴, and men should seek instruction⁵ from his mouth⁶; for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts.”

Think of it! If indeed the word of God is the “breath of God” by which the Lord created, upholds, and moves this world (cf. 2 Timothy 3:16a), then what only can transform the soul? The Holy Spirit working by and with the word!

2 Timothy 3:16-17, “All Scripture is inspired by God [God breathed] and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; THAT the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.”

No amount of worldly wisdom or inspiring stories can change the heart of man... only

God working by and with His word (cf. Isaiah 55:11)! And so, the responsibility and calling of any teacher of God's word is fidelity to the text!

The fourth and final element to the ministry of God's Word referenced here once again is the call to personal submission to it.

Malachi 2:6b, "True instruction was in his mouth, and unrighteousness was not found on his lips; he walked with Me in peace and uprightness, and he turned many back from iniquity."

Though we just discussed this, let me give you one more word here. Most likely you have heard and maybe even memorized Isaiah 55.

Isaiah 55:11, "So shall My word be which goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it."

What a glorious promise when it comes to God's word. Yet the promise here rarely is understood in its context. For that, notice in part.

Isaiah 55:13, "Instead of the thorn bush [which is a prickly, undesirable weed] the cypress will come up; and instead of the nettle [another type of thorn bush; in fact, the word used of this bush means 'to wail'] the myrtle will come up; and it will be a memorial to the LORD, for an everlasting sign which will not be cut off."

The contrast here is striking, weeds which produce thorns vs. evergreen/always green trees which is the picture life!

Stepping back, think about what we just read. In this world, when thorn bushes are watered, what happens? They grow bigger, stronger, and more dangerous. Yet what does God's word do when appropriated in the life of a sinner? It transforms the sinful, thorny heart into life! That is what we are after when it comes to God's word. Again, NOT ONLY ought we to long to know/understand the glory of God, BUT we want it to transform us!

That is the fourfold calling of the ministry of God's word! Yet in our humanness, all of this is counterintuitive. For again, what happens when our relationship with God becomes mechanistic? Eventually it will become man-centered, man-driven, and so man-glorifying — which is what occurred in the ministry of the priests in Malachi's day.

Notice the tendency of sinful man when it comes to the ministry of God's word.

Malachi 2:8a, "But as for you, you have turned aside from the way⁷; you have caused many to stumble by the instruction; you have corrupted the covenant of

Levi,' says the LORD of hosts.”

This is shocking! One of the primary functions of a priest was the instruction of God’s word. And yet this text tells us two things.

1. These Ministers of the Word of God “turned aside from the way”! This means that they stopped teaching God’s word faithfully. Well, if they weren’t teaching God’s word faithfully, what were they doing?
2. These Ministers of the Word of God were using the Bible to advance their own or another’s agenda which ultimately led the people of God astray! Look at the text again...

Malachi 2:8b, ““But as for you, you have turned aside from the way; you have caused many to stumble BY THE INSTRUCTION; [and as a result] you have corrupted the covenant of Levi,' says the LORD of hosts.”

How were they doing this? Notice the end of v. 9.

Malachi 2:9b, “So I also have made you despised and abased before all the people, just as you are not keeping My ways, but are showing partiality in the instruction⁸.”

From v. 8 we saw that the Priests had NOT abandoned the calling to instruct God’s people from God’s word. They still used God’s word as the basis of their ministry. BUT, RATHER than being true to God’s word, they used it to advance the agenda of the wealthy, strong, influential, and powerful. Via the word of God, they were “showing partiality in the instruction” which means they were preaching in order to please man!

Family of God, don’t fall asleep here. For as this is the way of man when it comes to the ministry of God’s Word, this will be what we in our flesh want from a pulpit! We see it in Jeremiah’s day.

Jeremiah 5:30-31a, “An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule on their own authority; and My people love it so!...”

If the people of God longed for this kind of ministry in Jeremiah’s day and in Malachi’s day, what do you suppose will be the longing of the flesh in our day? Speaking of the church in the latter days — which is the era in which we live — Paul warned us this way:

2 Timothy 4:3-4, “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths.”

Christian, beware of the idols/hobby horses you want the pulpit to respect or give heed to. They are legion:

- From race reconciliation to gender identity and homosexuality...
- From school choice to political issues...
- We want the pulpit to be relevant and contemporary.

That is why in so many churches today the word is NOT preached. What has taken its place are self-help lectures, social commentaries, counseling, or political commentaries.

That's what the priests of Malachi's day were known for. They used the word to advance the agenda of man — which brings us to one of the many consequences of a compromised pulpit.

The Consequence When the Ministry of God's Word is Compromised, v. 9a.

Malachi 2:9a, "So I also have made you despised and abased before all the people..."

This means that the priest's of Malachi's day were a joke. In other eras in Redemptive History, the office held a certain gravitas to is:

- You wouldn't cuss in front of a priest.
- You wouldn't do certain things.
- You would alter your behavior in their presence.

There was a level of respect and honor given to the priest. Yet all that was gone in Malachi's day! Now when the people of God saw a priest, they had one of two reactions: EITHER they took him lightly (they "despised" him) OR they actively ridiculed him which is what is behind the word for "abase"!

It sounds like our day, doesn't it? We might lament the world in which we live which

1. takes lightly God's word,
2. makes fun of Christianity, or
3. responds with anger to the Biblical teaching concerning gender identity, homosexuality, and the like.

Yet according to our text, much of the blame rests with the Minister of the Word of God. A society that takes lightly the Minister of God's Word will first have ministers who take lightly the Ministry of God's word! It goes hand in hand!

The Perfect Execution of the Ministry of God's Word, v. 4.

Malachi 2:4, ““Then you will know that I have sent this commandment to you, that My covenant may continue with Levi,’ says the LORD of hosts.”

Biblically speaking, we understand that the Old Testament Priestly Office was given by God as a shadow of the glorious office the Messiah would hold when He came. Accordingly, Jesus is the one and only true Priest. As that is the case, He is the fulfillment of the Ministry detailed in vv. 5-7.⁹ Do you understand what that means practically?

- The Pulpit ultimately must lead the people of God to the Chief Priest- that they might sit at His feet and so to be taught and comforted by Him. Short of this, the Pulpit will always let you down!
- We need to hear this. For there always is a danger for you and me to look to man to address our needs. Accordingly, it is natural to look to a church leader to comfort our hearts, dry our tears, sustain us in our trials, and so meet our needs. But that is not the work of a minister!

As we have seen this morning, the work of the minister is to lead God’s people to the fount of grace! Christ alone is the only one who can meet your needs. So, as I referenced a couple weeks ago, this means of grace — the preaching of God’s word — is NOT an end to itself, BUT given by God as a means to bring you to Christ that you might stay long on Him, and so have all your burdens, needs, and wants satisfied in Him! In a fallen world, that is how the ministry of God’s Word ultimately is fulfilled!

References

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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 (Num. 18:21), and on the other hand as the words of blessing which it was the prerogative of the priests to pronounce (Num. 6:24–26). In either case the blessings would recoil as a curse upon them..." (Baldwin, 1972, p. 252)

² "The making of the covenant with Levi is not formally recorded in the Old Testament. Indeed there is nothing complimentary to Levi either in the Genesis narratives (Gen. 29:34; 34:25, 26) or in the poem of Jacob (Gen. 49:5–7). The fact that Moses and Aaron were of the tribe of Levi (Exodus 2:1f.; 4:14) brought the tribe into prominence, and it was Levites who carried out Moses' orders after the incident of the golden calf (Exodus 32:26–29; cf. Deut. 33:8–11). The 'covenant of peace' mentioned in Numbers 25:11–13 is in connection with Phineas, the Aaronite, and not with the Levites as a whole..." (Baldwin, 1972, p. 2554)

³ As referenced in the previous endnote, you will note that there is no place where God entered into a covenant with Levi or his descendants in which He called them to be teachers of God's word. However, there is clear evidence that there was in fact such a covenant made. Consider Jeremiah 33:19-22 which says, "And the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah, saying, 'Thus says the LORD, "If you can break My covenant for the day, and My covenant for the night, so that day and night will not be at their appointed time, then My covenant may also be broken with David My servant that he shall not have a son to reign on his throne, and with the Levitical priests, My ministers.'" Accordingly, we take this statement NOT as hyperbole, BUT as a matter of fact that God established a covenant with the tribe of Levi to be teachers of God's word unto the pastoral care of God's flock.

⁴ "Certainly God could with his Spirit instruct and justify those whom he would, but it has pleased his wisdom more to instruct and justify those who believe through the foolishness of preaching. The Word is the channel through which the Holy Spirit is given. This is a passage against those who hold the spoken Word in contempt. The lips are the public reservoirs of the church. In them alone is kept the Word of God.... Unless the Word is preached publicly, it slips away. The more it is preached, the more firmly it is retained. Reading it is not as profitable as hearing it, for the live voice teaches, exhorts, defends, and resists the spirit of error. Satan does not care a hoot for the written Word of God, but he flees at the speaking of the Word.... This penetrates hearts and leads back those who stray." (Luther, 1962, p. 401)

⁵ "The people regularly brought their questions to the priests and received 'instruction' in how God's law, as delivered to Moses in the Pentateuch, should be worked out in their situation (cf. Haggai 2:11)" (Duguid, 2010, p. 210)

⁶ "Malachi assigns to the priest the role of personal counsellor, sought after by individuals who needed guidance in particular situations, and for this personal experience of God together with knowledge of his law was essential." (Baldwin, 1972, p. 256)

⁷ "...[this] phrase which echoes Israel's apostasy with the golden calf (Exodus 32:8)." (Duguid, 2010, p. 211)

⁸ "This probably means that they were rendering different judgements in similar circumstances, depending on who was asking the question. A rich man might be told that the law of Moses permitted his divorce, while the poor man might be told that his situation did not qualify." (Duguid, 2010, p. 211)

⁹ "God's desire to grant his people life and peace would not be frustrated by the sins and failures of their fickle religious representatives. What Israel needed was a perfect priest who would offer right sacrifices on their behalf and teach them the law accurately and fairly, making judgements that were truth-filled, not based on a respect for persons. This was a goal that the Levitical priesthood could never attain. ¶ That is why Jesus had to come as our great High Priest and just lawgiver (Matt. 5). He not only offered the perfect, once-for-all sacrifice towards which the covenant with Levi had pointed; he also taught us the perfect law of freedom. The work of the Levitical priesthood came to an end in the New Testament era, not because the covenant with Levi failed but because it fulfilled its ultimate purpose of pointing us to Christ (Hebrews 7:11–28)." (Duguid, 2010, pp. 212-213)