

Intro

Why do we read our Bibles? Why do we sit through sermons? Why do we stick around for Sunday school? Because we're supposed to? To say we did it? To feel good about ourselves? To relieve guilt? Or because we believe God's word is life-giving?

How do we get the most out of our Bibles? The most out of sermons? The most out of Sunday school? We listen. We meditate. We fight apathy and let God's truth reach our heart.

God's word will never profit us unless it reaches our heart in such a way that it changes our response to God. And a changed response to God results in God's blessing.

Let's see Malachi's contribution.

BIG IDEA: Respond to God's word with faith-driven obedience (or Don't Take God's Word Casually).

READ PASSAGE

Body

Passage Focus

The priests have neglected duty and led the people astray. They're already being cursed. God warns them to repent lest the cursing increase.

Point 1: Take God's Word to Heart (2:1-4)

"And now, O priests, this command is for you."

God singles out the priests here.

If you will not listen, if you will not take it to heart to give honor to my name, says the LORD of hosts,

This is the problem. The priests don't listen when God speaks. The message doesn't reach their hearts.

God is weighty. We can't treat God casually.

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.

The curse has already begun. But there's opportunity to reverse course. Repentance will stop the curse. Unrepentance means more cursing on the way. Why is God cursing the priests? *"because you do not lay it to heart."* What's cursed? Their blessings.

What are their blessings?

To answer this question, we need to understand God's covenant with Levi.

- 1) Levi was Jacob's 3rd son through Leah (Gen 29:34).
- 2) Levi was cursed with landlessness for violence against the men of Shechem (Gen 34:25-31; 49:5-7).
- 3) Levi's curse was transformed into blessing when the sons of Levi executed idolaters after the golden calf (Exod 32:25-29; Deut 33:8-11).
- 4) Phinehas, Aaron's grandson, was blessed after executing idolaters for God's honor (Num 25:1-9).

And the LORD said to Moses, ¹¹ "Phinehas the son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, has turned back my wrath from the people of Israel, in that he was jealous with my jealousy among them, so that I did not consume the people of Israel in my jealousy. ¹² Therefore say, 'Behold, I give to him my covenant of peace, ¹³ and it shall be to him and to his descendants after him the covenant of a perpetual priesthood, because he was jealous for his God and made atonement for the people of Israel.'" – Numbers 25:10-13

Interestingly, Phinehas' descendants are cursed for being casual with God's honor.

- 5) Aaron's descendants served as priests (Exod 28:1; Num 18:1; 1 Chron 24:1-31) while other Levites assisted in priestly duties (Num 1:50-53; 3:6-10; 18:2-7).
- 6) Since the Levites had no land, God would be their portion and the tithe would belong to them for survival (Num 18:20-24), like eating from offerings (Num 18:11-19).
- 7) Moses blessed Levi before dying.

¹⁰ They shall teach Jacob your rules and Israel your law; they shall put incense before you and whole burnt offerings on your altar. ¹¹ Bless, O LORD, his substance, and accept the work of his hands; crush the loins of his adversaries, of those who hate him, that they rise not again." – Deuteronomy 33:10-11

- 8) The covenant with Levi is found in the Old Covenant/law of Moses.

In short, Levi's blessing was responsibility to instruct, temple service, sustenance through the tithes, and protection from enemies.

They were beginning to lose these blessings.

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.

If the priests persisted in unrepentance...

- 1) Their offspring (descendants) would suffer = lose the priesthood.
- 2) God would spread the dung from their offerings (dung inside the animals being sacrificed) on their faces = unclean and unfit for the priesthood.

Likely not literal. Saying I'll disqualify you.

- 3) "you shall be taken away with it" = carried outside the camp where the dung goes = removed from the priesthood.

What does it mean to be cursed by God?

- 1) Removal of blessing (e.g., the garden)
- 2) Experiencing misfortune and affliction (e.g., painful childbirth and hard work)
- 3) Not mechanical = God is the power behind the affliction and God determines the exact nature of one's experience
- 4) The cursed individual is powerless to resist God's power
- 5) The priests' curse results from violating a relationship with God (Old Covenant stipulations – see Deut 28)

Don't think superstition when you think curse. Think God's individual punishment on a person's unfaithfulness.

So shall you know that I have sent this command to you, that my covenant with Levi may stand, says the LORD of hosts.

Disobedience is assumed. The curse will intensify. Ignoring covenant stipulations = loss of responsibility, provision, protection.

Taking God's command to heart

What does taking God's command to heart look like? We notice something while reading our Bible. We hear something in a sermon. We learn something in Sunday school. A sinful tendency or neglect of duty. Will we consider what we've read or heard? Or will we move on like nothing happened? At this point we're faced with a choice. Which path will we take? Will we **listen**? Maybe it's something we need to investigate further. We don't really understand what we're reading or hearing. If we decide to investigate further, what will we do? Twist it to get the meaning we want? Which is actually ignoring God. Or will we honor God by obeying him?

There's two choices. Ignore God or honor God. Take God's word to heart! Listen-meditate-obey.

Non-Christian

This is how God deals with us. He speaks. We either lay it to heart or we don't. We either experience blessing or curse. Our response to God dictates our experience in this life and in the life to come.

Evangelism

Our duty is calling others to take God's word to heart. To listen. To consider. To repent. To honor God.

Point 2: God's covenant is life and peace (2:5-7)

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.

God's covenant with Levi was life and peace. Life and peace came to Levi in the early days.

Life = more than just being physically alive. It's long life because they're not under God's curse and ruined by self-inflicted consequences. It's life in the land because Moses' covenant is being kept and the nation is safe. It's quality of life. Under God's blessings, not his curse.

Peace = well-being in terms of peace with God, health, prosperity (crops and animals), and protection from foreign enemies. Keeping the Old Covenant stipulations meant experiencing God's blessing.

God's covenant with Levi was intended to produce reverence for God (fear). The covenant was awe-inspiring in that the slightest misstep of sacrifice procedures would result in death. For example, Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, were consumed by fire from God for offering "*unauthorized fire*" (Lev 10:1-2).

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.

The priests taught Israel God's law. In the beginning, the priests conducted themselves with accurate teaching and upright conduct. (Upright = straight = conforming to God's law.) Two positives resulted:

- 1) They were at peace with God = under his blessing, not his curse.
- 2) The people turned from sin = repented and believed.

Teachers, correct teaching mixed with correct conduct results in positive influence.

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.

This is the ideal. What the priest should do. What the people should do.

Guard = a priest's mouth should guard knowledge in terms of protection. By teaching what is true, they preserve knowledge. Those who speak for God have a body of doctrine they must protect!

Seek = the people's obligation to seek out instruction.

When the law was first given, the priests were faithful. But not in Malachi's day.

What is the good life?

The Levites had the good life. Peace with God. A life lived under his blessing, not his curse.

The same for us. The good life is salvation through Jesus Christ.

Salvation past, present, and future.

- 1) Forgiveness of sins. Peace with God. Sins remembered no more. Past, present, and future. Declared righteous despite our law-breaking (justification). Living from forgiveness not for forgiveness.
- 2) A new heart. No longer a slave to sin. No longer unable to obey God (Rom 8:7-8). Newness of life = Christ in you. God working in our heart to work his good pleasure (Phil 2:13). New power to fight sin and its destructive effects. Ability to overcome a troublesome tongue or despair or addiction. Renewed mind and wisdom. Yes, there's much hope in this life through Jesus. As a pastor, I want to help you live blessed lives. Today.

Yes, we need the Holy Spirit to enable our obedience.

- 3) The new Jerusalem. Dwelling with God forever in a world without sin and death and suffering.

New Covenant

Like the Levites, life and peace come through covenant. The New Covenant. We celebrate it the first Sunday of every month when we remember Jesus' death. When Jesus died on the cross for our sins, he ratified the New Covenant.

It's in the New Covenant that we find salvation past, present, and future.

We enter the New Covenant and all its blessings through faith and repentance.

Elders

The local church elder corresponds to the Old Covenant priest. Elders guard the gospel (e.g., the apostles' doctrine) by speaking the truth correctly. We influence people to turn from sin, whether maturity or conversion, by teaching correctly and living correctly. Yes, we can only do this through the Spirit's empowering grace.

The elder is a messenger. Not in terms of bringing new revelation. Rather, calling people back to old revelation. Much like Malachi did.

O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called "knowledge," ²¹ for by professing it some have swerved from the faith. Grace be with you. – 1 Timothy 6:20-21

Guard the doctrine entrusted to you. When it's hard and there's resistance. Do this in God's strength (grace).

Point 3: Rejecting God's word brings ruin (2:8-9)

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,

The priests in Malachi's day failed. Instead of faithful teaching and conduct turning the people from sin, the priests themselves turned to sin. Resulting in the people stumbling.

Those who follow false teachers are responsible for choosing to follow the "bad guys." But woe to the "bad guys" who lead others to ruin.

The covenant was corrupted. Instead of sound leaders influencing the people to a place of blessing, unsound leaders were influencing people to reject God and suffer his curse.

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."

In 2:2, God said, *"I have already cursed them."* Here we see the curse playing out. The people despise the priests and have no regard for them. God takes credit for this. He is making the people despise the priests.

The picture is a corrupt priesthood. Teaching and doing the wrong things. For example, not upholding laws related to animal sacrifice. The people lose respect for priests who don't enforce the standard and let people do whatever they want. Then the priests show partiality. Maybe towards the wealthy and those with influence. No one respects impartial judges. The law isn't being taught so the law isn't being followed. Through their teaching and conduct, the priests have moved the people against God. And under his curse.

Stumbling Illustration

Coaching kids in the home. Are my actions causing my siblings to sin? Mean words. Same in the church.

Elders

It's our duty to commend the gospel through our teaching and actions. Woe to us if we lead people astray! Leading God's people is a weighty calling! That's why getting it right is critical!

People

It's your duty to examine who you're following. Are we getting our ideas from Scripture or somewhere else? Are we twisting what the Bible's saying? Expect those teaching in this church to justify with Bible what we're telling you.

Be open to new ideas. Or aspects of a truth you never considered. Be open to learning. Consider what's said. Be willing to take God's word to heart.

There's a place for bearing with your elders. Bearing with one another includes the elders too (Col 3:12-13).

And there's a place for rejecting bad leaders. You in the pew should be able to identify error when it's in front of you. There's a place for respectfully talking with elders. There's a place for rejecting "Christian" authors and internet and TV preachers.

Non-Christian

Our fundamental problem is we don't respond to God correctly. We don't take what he says to heart. In Malachi's day, God spoke through prophets. Today he speaks through his word. The Bible. This is how our Creator has chosen to relate to us! When we don't take God's word to heart. When we don't trust God and turn from our sin to God, we remain under his curse.

Jesus became a curse so that everyone who believes might be rescued from God's curse (Gal 3:13-14). We come into the world separated from God, under his curse. Guilty of sins. A sinful nature. God's wrath (hell) hanging over us.

There's a way to move from cursed to blessed. It's through Jesus. And only through Jesus. When we take God's word to heart, we move from cursed to blessed.

Conclusion

Respond to God's word with faith-driven obedience.

First, Take God's Word to Heart.

Listen-meditate-do.

God's covenant is life and peace.

Understand what the good life is.

Rejecting God's word brings ruin.

Experience God's blessing by honoring his word.