

Malachi--Meeting the Challenge of Spiritual Stagnation The importance of affirming God's greatness, #2

Intro: This is our third lesson Malachi and we have been seen that God addressed Israel during a time of spiritual stagnation and malaise. We can learn a lot from listening in on the dialogue between God and His people. First we can see the causes of this condition. Second we can see how to prevent or overcome it. That information can be useful to us, since we too may face the same challenge.

In the first paragraph we see that Israel had lost a sense of God's love and thus began to question their special relationship to God.

In the second paragraph we saw that priests had lost a sense of God's greatness and thus lost the sense of privilege they had in serving in God's house.

As I mentioned last week, God's conversation with the priests is lengthy; and so we looked at the first half last week in which God addresses their poor attitudes toward the privilege of serving in God's house and urges them to consider His greatness and restore their sense of privilege. Now God enlarges upon this by both a threat of punishment and even further indications of the priests' failings.

Now let's consider the second half of the dialogue:

The second dialogue (addressed specifically to the priests)

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, "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. Behold, I am going to rebuke your offspring, and I will spread refuse on your faces, the refuse of your feasts; and you will be taken away with it. Then you will know that I have sent this commandment to you, that My covenant may continue with Levi," says the Lord of hosts. 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. 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. For the lips of a priest should preserve knowledge, and men should seek instruction from his mouth; for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts. But as for you, you have turned aside from the way; you have caused many to stumble by the instruction; you have corrupted the covenant of Levi," says the Lord of hosts. 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 instruction. (Mal. 2:1-9)

Thinking through the conversation

Again, God's message is addressed to the priests. Because they are not taking His words to heart, He now threatens them with judgment. The language is very strong, apparently necessary because of the flippant attitude of the priesthood.

If the priest will not give God His proper honor, then they will be cursed. In the OT the curse is the verbal judgment of God that takes away the blessings of His covenant. God would take away the blessing of the priests because of their disobedience. He may also have in the mind the reversal of the priestly blessing that the priests spoke to the people (Cf. Num. 6:22ff).

Moreover, God will "rebuke their offspring," lit. "seed," an indication that the priests would not have a lasting house or lineage. In addition, He would "spread refuse on their faces." This language may offend our modern sensibilities; but it should be understood in light of the ancient priestly practice.

The "refuse" is the offal of the animals that was not offered in sacrifice but was commonly taken outside the camp and burned.

God is returning in kind what the priests have done to Him.

They have "defiled Him" with their second-rate sacrifices.

Now God will "defile" them with the refuse of their sacrifices.

It may also be a figure for death, since they would be buried outside the camp and the offal of the sacrifices would be spread over them.

As an incentive to repent, God reminds these priests of the covenant that God had made with Levi.

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. 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.

"Levi" was the head of the tribe that bears His name, the tribe from which the priests and caretakers of the tabernacle came. It appears the reference is not merely to the son of Israel, but to the ancient tribe of faithful priests. God may be thinking of the zeal of Phinehas in particular mentioned in Num. 25.

The people of Israel had been lured into idolatry by the daughters of Moab. God sent a plague to punish the people.

Even while Moses and others were weeping in repentance at the tent of meeting, an Israelite man was bringing a Midianite woman into his tents.

When Aaron's son, Phinehas, saw what was happened he followed them into the tent and killed them with a spear and the plague stopped.

The episode prompted God to make this promise to this faithful Levite:

Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, has turned away My wrath from the sons of Israel, in that he was jealous with My jealousy among them, so that I did not destroy the sons of Israel in My jealousy. Therefore say, 'Behold, I give him My covenant of peace; and it shall be for him and his descendants after him, a covenant of a perpetual priesthood, because he was jealous for his God, and made atonement for the sons of Israel.'" (Num. 25:10-13)

God in speaking through Malachi recalls the incident and the promise He made that day, indicating the kind of person who would be honored and blessed in His service.

However the priests of Malachi's day had not fulfilled their covenantal responsibilities as Levi's descendants.

For the lips of a priest should preserve knowledge, and men should seek instruction from his mouth; for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts. But as for you, you have turned aside from the way; you have caused many to stumble by the instruction; you have corrupted the covenant of Levi," says the Lord of hosts. 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 instruction. (Malachi 2:1-9)

And so those who were supposed to instruct others had themselves rejected God's truth, turning aside from the way. Their example became a stumbling block to others by leading them astray, showing partiality in the instruction. And the covenant that God had made was corrupted by their sinful behavior.

Consequently, just as they had made God despised and abased, so they would be "despised and abased" before the people.

And so we can see that the priests by failing to appreciate God's greatness, not only had a poor sense of privilege in serving in God's house, but also in obeying and teaching God's law.

Learning from the conversation

God's message to the OT priests is relevant to us as well. For all of us are to use Peter's words "a holy nation and a royal priesthood" (1 Pet. 2:9) you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1 Pet. 2:5)

We no longer, of course, offer animals; but instead we offer ourselves as "living sacrifices."

I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. (Rom. 12:1)

As God priests, we also have a role in instructing others.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; (1 Pet. 2:9)

And so as God's priests we must not only offer the sacrifices of our calling, but be a source of instruction to others. As we do that, we are energized by the effort to teach others. A person who is busy sincerely teaching the truth to others will not find himself in spiritual stagnation.

Conclusion: If we are to meet the challenges of spiritual stagnation, we must not only keep affirming God's love for us, reflecting upon His greatness and the privilege of serving Him, but also recognizing that we possess the instruction of our great king and we possess the sacred duty to share His word with others.

This week remember that priestly role; and how you may be the messenger of God that speaks to someone who needs to hear the truth.