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Bad Teachers

Malachi 2 v 1-9

Introduction

Do you remember your teachers at school? No doubt you had many teachers and most of them will be forgotten. But there may have been one or two who were particularly good, and you remember their classes fondly. They knew their subject, cared about the pupils and taught well.

But you may also remember some particularly bad teachers. Maybe they just didn't seem to know the subject. Maybe they didn't seem to care about teaching it. Or maybe they couldn't control the class. I had a history teacher who used to mysteriously leave the class for 20 minutes each time we had him. When he came back the class would be in uproar, and he would threaten to belt the whole lot of us. One time he did - all the boys at least.

Teaching history in a Scottish high school is one thing. Teaching the word of God to a nation is a different responsibility entirely. And we're going to see that God takes it very seriously.

Recap

If you've been following along you'll know that the book of Malachi is set in the period after the return from exile of the Jews. The temple is built, the walls are restored, and you'd expect the people to be zealous for the God who has restored them.

But God has some things to say. And he does this in a series of debates. We heard first God say "I have loved you" and he showed this love in his choosing of Jacob over Esau, of the nation of Israel over the nation of Edom.

Last week God started his second debate by addressing the "*priests, who despise my name*". He accused them of bringing polluted food to be offered at the temple. They were taking the poorest of the animals instead of the best. God called them cheats for doing this.

This week we will continue this debate with the priests, who despised God's name by being bad teachers.

Blessing Turned to Curse

> *"And now, O priests, this command is for you. If you will not listen, if you will 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. Indeed, I have already cursed them, because you do not lay it to heart. 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.*
>
> *[Malachi 2 v 1-3]*

Malachi says "*this command is for you*". It's not obvious what the command is because he doesn't follow it up by stating a command. Some commentators have suggested that the whole book

of Malachi is the command, but I think it probably relates to the following text: "*If you will not listen, if you will not take to heart to honour my name*". One of the main tasks for the priests was to honour God. They were failing to do that because they had allowed polluted sacrifices. They didn't seem to have any care for their duties. In chapter one we heard they said "*what a weariness this is*". Maybe it was too much effort to refuse the offered sacrifice and tell the people to go back home and bring a better one. Maybe they felt that it wasn't their fault if the people were bringing unsuitable animals to the temple. But God says it was very much their fault. It was their duty to honour God, and they were failing in their duty. He says their hearts weren't in it.

And because they are not honouring God, he says their blessings will turn to curses. In fact he has already cursed them and they don't seem to have noticed. That's how little they care about their responsibilities. There are two particular curses God talks about:

1. Their offspring will be rebuked. God doesn't lay the blame for our sins on our children, but often they are the ones who suffer the consequences. Without role models to follow the children of the priests are just going to make the same mistakes and have the same lack of heart for their God-given task as their parents. It's going to be hard to lift themselves back up to the level of service they should be showing.
2. Their faces will be smeared with dung. This seems a strange and particularly distasteful punishment. But there's a point to it. Listen to God's instruction for dealing with the various parts of the sacrifice from Exodus 29:

   "Then you shall bring the bull before the tent of meeting. Aaron and his sons shall lay their hands on the head of the bull. Then you shall kill the bull before the Lord at the entrance of the tent of meeting, and shall take part of the blood of the bull and put it on the horns of the altar with your finger, and the rest of the blood you shall pour out at the base of the altar. And you shall take all the fat that covers the entrails, and the long lobe of the liver, and the two kidneys with the fat that is on them, and burn them on the altar. But the flesh of the bull and its skin and its dung you shall burn with fire outside the camp; it is a sin offering.

   [Exodus 29 v 10-14]

   If you asked the priests what part of the offering they thought themselves to be, they would maybe say the blood, the life of the nation, honoured by being put on the horns of the altar. Or maybe the fat, presented before God on the altar. But no, God says they are the dung, not fit for the altar, only to be taken outside the camp and burned.

This is the consequence of not honouring God as they were supposed to. Let's look some more at this responsibility that was theirs. God calls it a covenant.

The Covenant of Levi

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

[Malachi 2 v 4-5]

How may tribes were there in Israel? It seems an easy question: surely 12 is the answer. But it's not as easy as that. Jacob had 12 sons. But Joseph was father to 2 tribes: Mannaseh and Ephraim, so what are the 12 tribes?

Well, when Israel conquered the land of Canaan, and divided up the land, there were only 12 portions of land mentioned, even though Joseph's two sons got one each. The reason was that Levi didn't have any land. They had a special role. Let's go back to see why…

On the third day, when they were sore, two of the sons of Jacob, Simeon and Levi, Dinah's brothers, took their swords and came against the city while it felt secure and killed all the males.

[Genesis 34 v 25]

Simeon and Levi took revenge on Shechem and his people, because he had raped their sister Dinah. They persuaded Shechem's people to be circumcised, and then while they were still in pain, went in and attacked them. Jacob wasn't happy with his 2 sons, and he didn't forget about it either:

"Simeon and Levi are brothers;
weapons of violence are their swords.
Let my soul come not into their council;
O my glory, be not joined to their company.
For in their anger they killed men,
and in their willfulness they hamstrung oxen.
Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce,
and their wrath, for it is cruel!
I will divide them in Jacob
and scatter them in Israel.

[Genesis 49 v 5-7]

But just like Jacob and Esau, it seems that Gd was going to favour one over the other. His curse was that the two tribes would be scattered. For Simeon it meant that rather than get a full portion of land, they would live among the people of Judah, and eventually be merged into them:

The second lot came out for Simeon, for the tribe of the people of Simeon, according to their clans, and their inheritance was in the midst of the inheritance of the people of Judah.

[Joshua 19 v 1]

However the scattering of Levi's people was turned by God's grace into a blessing. Rather than be merged into another tribe, the Levites were to live among all the other tribes and act as priests and teachers of the law. Maybe one of the reasons for this can be found at the time when Moses was up the mountain and the people demanded a golden calf be made for their worship.

then Moses stood in the gate of the camp and said, "Who is on the Lord's side? Come to me." And all the sons of Levi gathered around him. And he said to them, "Thus says the Lord God of Israel, 'Put your sword on your side each of you, and go to and fro from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you kill his brother and his companion and his neighbor.'" And the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses. And that day about three thousand men of the people fell. And Moses said, "Today you have been ordained for the service of the Lord, each one at the cost of his son and of his brother, so that he might bestow a blessing upon you this day."

[Exodus 32 v 26-29]

So because the tribe of Levi had stood by Moses, and had been willing to carry out the punishment of God on their own families and neighbours, they were given a special position.

Later on God would set them aside as his possession. He had previously said that the firstborn son of each family was to be dedicated to him, but he changed that, and instead the tribe of Levi became that love gift to the Lord.

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "Behold, I have taken the Levites from among the people of Israel instead of every firstborn who opens the womb among the people of Israel. The Levites shall be mine, for all the firstborn are mine. On the day that I struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I consecrated for my own all the firstborn in Israel, both of man and of beast. They shall be mine: I am the Lord."

[Number 3 v 11-13]

What were they tasked with doing?

1. Some were to be priests, as the children of Aaron [Leviticus 9]
2. Some were to work in the tabernacle and later the temple [Numbers 8]
3. Some were taught the law and were made judges [2 Chronicles 19]
4. Some were singers [2 Chronicles 5]
5. Some were made scribes, copying out the law [2 Chronicles 34]

So we can see that God turned the curse they received from Jacob into a blessing, as they held a special position with him. In our passage in Malachi God says that his covenant with the Levites is one where they fear him and give him honour, and he gives them life and peace.

That position as expert in the law, and teacher and judge of the people is a blessing and a responsibility. Malachi shows us what it looks like when it is done properly:

What Does Good Teaching Look Like?

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. 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.

[Malachi 2 v 6-7]

The Levites were to know the law, and to proclaim it faithfully and truthfully. They were to guard that knowledge, to keep it from being lost or being altered. They were to have God's word on their lips, but also in their actions as they lived upright lives. And they were to teach the people.

Were the Levites in Malachi's day like this?

And Now the Bad

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, 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."

[Malachi 2 v 8-9]

The priests had failed their part in the covenant of Levi. They were supposed to be an example to Israel, but they had left the path themselves. Instead of turning many from iniquity, they had caused many to stumble by their teaching.. And so instead of life and peace, they were going to receive derision and abasement.

The priests were supposed to fear the Lord and honour him in a heartfelt way. Instead they had sought honour for themselves from their high position. God was going to take that honour away. As they despised his name, so they would be despised.

Conclusion

The tribe of Levi were given a great blessing, but also a responsibility. They were to know the law, guard the law, teach the law and live the law. But they had failed, and so they were being cursed.

Is there a message here for anyone today? Does the covenant of Levi apply to anyone in the church? Are there those who are charged with guarding the word of God, and of teaching it to others?

1. To preachers - it is a solemn undertaking to teach the word of God. A preacher must be careful that his words reflect the truth and his instruction is good.
2. To other teachers in the church - kids teachers, growth group leaders, parents, discipleship leaders. Each of these has a responsibility to teach someone, and also to be examples for other to follow.
3. To all believers in Jesus Christ who are among the church, among family, among colleagues, classmates, or friends - very few people read the Bible nowadays, so we might be the only ones to be able to present God's word to them.

So we must learn God's word. We must teach God's word. And we must live God's word, honouring him with our lives. Because we make an impact. Just as we remember the really good teachers and the really bad ones, our witness can make a lasting impression on those around us.

If you are here and you are not a Christian, I'm guessing that you didn't come along because you heard you could learn about the Bible here. You probably came because you know

someone who is a Christian and you've seen something different in their lives. We read about it in the covenant with Levi. They have life and they have peace. What did they do to get it? The Bible says they feared the Lord. They realised they were poor sinners before a holy God and they needed a saviour. And they gratefully accepted the gift of his son as sacrifice, saviour and Lord. You can too.