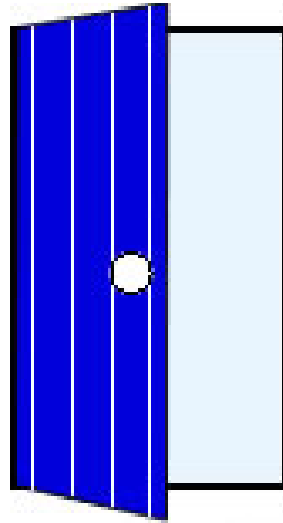


BIBLE STUDIES



Mill Lane Chapel

Malachi

(4) "The priest's lips should keep knowledge"

Read Chapter 2: 1-9

This chapter discusses three covenants, and the first of these provides the link with the previous chapter. They are: **(1)** The covenant with Levi, V1-9. See V4, 5 & 8; **(2)** The covenant with the fathers, V10-12. See V10; **(3)** The covenant of marriage, V13-16. See V14. In each case, God's people had proved unfaithful. All three covenants had been broken.

1) THE COVENANT WITH LEVI, V1-9

Notice the expressions, "That My **covenant** might be with Levi", V4: "My **covenant** was with him", V5: "Ye have corrupted the **covenant** of Levi", V8.

This is the second message to the priests." And now, O ye priests, this commandment is for **you**." The words, "for you", are emphatic. The first message (1: 6-14) emphasises the failure in their ministry **Godward**. The second message emphasises the failure in their ministry **manward**. Both messages emphasise **God's Name**. There are ten references to His name in Malachi: six of them occur in the first message to the priests, and two of them in the second message. (For the remaining two references, see 3: 16 and 4: 2). We have already noticed that His name had been "despised" by the priests, 1: 6: but it would be "great among the heathen", 1: 11. His name had been "profaned" by His people, 1: 12: but it was "dreadful (feared or revered) among the heathen", 1: 14. God expected the priests to "give glory" to His name (2: 2).

The message to the priests is in two parts. **(A)** They are given a **commandment**, V1-4. The section commences with the words: "And now, O ye priests, this commandment is for you", V1. **(B)** They are reminded of the **covenant**, V5-9. The section commences with the words: "My covenant was with him of life and peace", V5.

A) THEY ARE GIVEN A COMMANDMENT, V1-4

In this section we must notice **(i)** The commandment they were to keep, V1-2A, **(ii)** The curse they would incur, V2B-3, **(iii)** The continuity of their office, V4.

(i) The commandment they were to keep, V1-2A

"And now, O ye priests, **this commandment** is for you", V1. The word "commandment" is evidently used in a general sense. The purpose of their ministry was to bring glory to God. But they had despised and profaned His name (1: 6, 12). Disobedience would incur judgement: "If ye will not hear, and if ye will not lay it to heart, to give glory unto **my name**, saith the Lord of hosts, I will even send a curse upon you", V2. We should notice the following.

a) They were to "hear." Quite obviously, this means far more than natural hearing. The Lord Jesus told His disciples to "take heed.....**how** ye hear" (Luke 8: 18) as well as "**what** ye hear" (Mark 4: 24). Wise men hear and obey: foolish men hear and disobey. See Matthew 7: 24-27. Compare Revelation 2-3. "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches", 2: 11, etc.

b) They were to "lay it to heart." This summarises the way in which they were to hear God's word. They were to feel its weight. Do **we** "lay it to heart?" See Psalm 119: 11, "Thy word have I hid in mine **heart** that I might not sin against Thee." Daniel purposed in his **heart** that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's meat, nor with the wine that he drank", Daniel 1: 8. The Lord Jesus said: "Let these sayings sink down into your ears", Luke 9: 44. The word "sink" (*tithemi*) actually means 'lay.' God's word should bring both conviction and joy. For the former, see Isaiah 66: 2. For the latter, see Jeremiah 15: 16.

c) They were to "give glory unto my name." Their unworthy sacrifices brought no glory to God. We must remember that whilst the passage refers particularly to the worship of the priests, our entire lives are to be conducted for God's glory. See 1 Corinthians 10: 31, "Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God." We were saved for this purpose. See Ephesians 1: 6 & 12. Compare 1 Corinthians 6: 19-20, "Know ye not that.....ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's."

ii) The curse they would incur, V2B-4

"If ye will not hear, and if ye will not lay it to heart, to give glory unto My Name, saith the Lord of hosts, I will even send a **curse** upon you, and I will **curse** your blessings; yea I have **cursed** them already, because ye do not lay it to heart. Behold, I will corrupt your seed, and spread dung upon your faces, even the dung of your solemn feasts, and one shall take you away with it."

a) The priesthood would be materially disadvantaged. "**I will** even send a curse upon you, and **I will** curse **your blessings**; yea, I have cursed them already, because ye do not lay it to heart." Compare Deuteronomy 28, where V1-14 describe "all these blessings", and V15-68 describe "all these curses." Whilst some commentators suggest that the "blessings" of the priests here refers to the blessings they pronounced (see Numbers 6: 24-26), it seems more likely that God refers to the tithes to which they were entitled under the law. See Numbers 18: 21. Their failure to offer acceptable sacrifices had a 'knock-on effect.' As they did not demand acceptable offerings in the first place, their part of the offerings (see Leviticus 7: 31-32) was also inferior. On the other hand, God saw to it that the spiritual barrenness of the people, for which the priests were largely responsible, brought crop failure (3: 11), with its dire results for animal husbandry, and therefore support for the priesthood diminished. In this way, God

cursed their "blessings." Compare Haggai 1: 9-11, "Ye looked for much, and, lo, it came to little; and when ye brought it home, *I* did blow upon it." It is another example of the law of sowing and reaping. We damage ourselves when we fail to honour God in our lives. Malachi also tells us what happens when we **do** honour God in our lives, He doesn't curse our blessings then! "Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it", 3: 9-12.

b) The priesthood would be numerically diminished. "*I will corrupt your seed.*" JND renders 'I will **rebuke** your seed.' Whilst this could refer to literal seed (see Haggai 1: 6, "Ye have sown much, and bring in little"), it seems more likely to be an allusion to the priests' families. Compare Jeremiah 31: 27, "Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the **seed** of men." These words probably refer, therefore, to a reduction in priestly succession. 'Their seed should be rejected, and thus the family of Levi set aside from their appointed place of privilege', H.A.Ironside (*Notes on the Minor Prophets*). See Hosea 3: 4. If they would not heed the **rebuke**, they would be **removed**. We endanger continuity in service when we fail to honour God in our lives.

c) The priesthood would be utterly disgraced. "I will.....spread dung upon your faces, even the dung of your solemn feasts, and one shall take you away with it." This refers to Exodus 29: 14 and Leviticus 4: 11. The offal was removed from the sanctuary, and burnt outside the camp, and that is where the priests would find themselves. They would be excluded from the presence of God. They would suffer the greatest possible ignominy, and be swept away in the most humiliating circumstances. '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', J.G.Baldwin (*Haggai Zechariah Malachi: Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*). Compare Revelation 3: 16, "I will spue thee out of My mouth." We dishonour our testimony when we fail to honour God in our lives. But God did not intend to extinguish the priesthood, as the next verse makes clear:

(iii) The continuity of their office, V4

"And ye shall know that I have sent this **commandment** unto you, that my covenant might be with Levi, saith the Lord of hosts.", V4. Compare 3: 6. So the warning begins and ends with the word "commandment." The commandment was intended to bring them to repentance so that the covenant might hold. But God will not allow the covenant to be nullified, or lapse, through man's failure. His purpose will be fulfilled, even though He will be obliged to purge the Levites. See 3: 3-4. As J.G.Baldwin points out, 'all the warnings of the Bible are positive in their aim (Ezekiel 18: 32).' It is worth remembering that none of God's purposes will ever fail. He will accomplish His intentions.

B) THEY ARE REMINDED OF THE COVENANT, V5-9

The solemn judgement of V1-4 arose from the fact that original obedience (V5-7) had become disobedience (V8-9). We should notice **(i)** The covenant was made with an **ideal** priest, V5-7: **(ii)** The covenant was abused by **evil** priests, V8-9.

i) The covenant was made with an ideal priest, V5-7

"My covenant was with him of life and peace; and I gave them to him for the fear wherewith he feared Me, and was afraid before My Name. The law of truth was in his mouth, and iniquity was not found in his lips: he walked with Me in peace and equity, and did turn away many from iniquity. For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth: for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts." How beautifully these words describe our Great High Priest! They can be understood:

a) With reference to Levi generally. The passage alludes to the **tribe**, rather than the man. The language of Malachi 2: 5-7 does not fit Levi well! See Genesis 49: 5-7 etc. The words, "My covenant was with him of life and peace; and I gave them to him for the fear wherewith he feared me, and was afraid before my name", recall Exodus 32: 26-29. Notice the words, "Consecrate yourselves today to the Lord, even every man upon his son ('with his son', JND: 'against his son', RV), and upon his brother ('with his brother', JND: 'against his brother', RV); that **He may bestow upon you a blessing this day**", V29. (The RV seems more accurate in context). Compare Deuteronomy 33: 8-11, "And of Levi he (Moses) said, Let thy Thummim and thy Urim be with thy holy one, whom thou didst prove at Massah, and with whom thou didst strive at the waters of Meribah; who said unto his father and to his mother, I have not seen him; neither did he acknowledge his brethren, nor knew his own children: for they have observed thy word, and kept thy **covenant**. They shall teach Jacob thy judgements, and Israel thy law: they shall put incense before thee, and whole burnt sacrifice upon thine altar." This reminds us that God will honour them that honour Him. See 1 Samuel 2: 30.

However, the language used in V5-6 strongly recalls one particular priest, Phinehas, "the son of Eleazer the son of Aaron the priest", whose zeal for God helped to terminate "the fierce anger of the Lord" against Israel. These verses can therefore be understood

b) With reference to Phinehas particularly. See Numbers 25, where the word "covenant" is used for the first time in connection with the priesthood. "And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, hath turned my wrath away from the children of Israel, while he was zealous for my sake among them, that I consumed not the children of Israel in my jealousy. Wherefore say, Behold, I give unto him my **covenant** of peace: and

he shall have it, and his seed after him, even the **covenant** of an everlasting priesthood; because he was **zealous for his God**, and made an atonement for the children of Israel", V10-13.

The covenant with Levi involved "life and peace." As a covenant of **"life"**, its duration is stressed. In the case of Phinehas, it was "an everlasting priesthood." However, "life" could be understood with reference to divine provision for the priesthood. See Deuteronomy 18: 1-8. As a covenant of **"peace"**, relationship with God is stressed. "The Lord is their inheritance." We should notice some features of the ideal priest:

a) Godward. "My covenant was with him of life and peace; and I gave them to him for the **fear** wherewith he feared Me, and was **afraid** before My Name." As we have observed, this recalls both the zeal of the Levites at Sinai, and the zeal of Phinehas at Shittim. "He was zealous for My sake." God's priest was zealous for the truth. This had become lamentably absent. The word "fear" (*yare*) means 'reverential awe.' Compare 1: 14: "My name is **dreadful** (*yare*) among the heathen." The word "afraid" means 'to abase onself before.' It is the complete opposite of the attitude described in 1: 6.

b) Selfward We must notice his **words**. First of all, positively, what **was** in his mouth: "The law of truth was in his mouth." Secondly, negatively, what **was not** in his mouth, "and iniquity was not found in his lips." This reminds us again of our Great High Priest. The Lord Jesus meets every requirement! "Thou hast loved righteousness, and hated iniquity", Hebrews 1: 9 citing Psalm 45: 7. We must notice his **walk**. "He walked with Me in peace and equity (JND 'righteousness')." This implies close **communion** with Him: "Can two walk together except they be agreed", Amos 3: 3. It implies **enjoyment** of God: "peace." It implies **obedience** to God: "equity."

c) Manward. He "did turn many away from iniquity." How? By his zeal for truth. By his refusal to compromise. See, again, events at Sinai and Shittim. But V7 gives the long-term explanation: "For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth: for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts." The true priest turns "away many from iniquity", by teaching.

So the true priest was a man who **communicated** God's word. He both stored the word of God in his heart, **and imparted it**. See 1 Chronicles 15: 3, "now for a long season Israel hath been without the true God, and without a **teaching priest**, and without law." This reminds us of the importance of teaching elders. It follows that the true priest was a man who gave **counsel**. "They should seek the law at his mouth." He is "the messenger of the Lord of hosts." He brings the word of God. As a man who "did turn many away from iniquity", the priest had a ministry of **protection and recovery**. The need for this is unabated. See 1 Timothy 4: 16, "Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee." See Titus

1: 9, "Holding fast the faithful word, as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers." Hence the emphasis on "sound doctrine." (Greek *huganos*: English 'hygiene'). So Titus 1: 13, "Rebuke them sharply, that they may be **sound** in the faith." Titus 2: 1, "But speak thou the things that become **sound** doctrine."

ii) The covenant was abused by evil priests, V8-9

This section is introduced with the chilling words, "But ye." Like the Galatians, it had to be said, "Ye did run well", 5: 7. **"But ye** are departed out of the way; ye have caused many to stumble at the law; ye have corrupted the covenant of Levi, saith the Lord of hosts. Therefore have I also made you contemptible and base before all the people, according as ye have not kept my ways, but have been partial in the law." Once again, we encounter the law of sowing and reaping. See Galatians 6: 7. The priests had led the people astray, and earned their contempt. We must notice **(a)** Their infamous conduct, and **(b)** Their inevitable condemnation.

a) Their infamous conduct. "Ye are departed out of the way; ye have caused many to stumble at the law; ye have corrupted the covenant of Levi, saith the Lord of hosts."

In the first place, they had "departed out of the way." That is, the way described in V6: "The law of truth was in his mouth.....he walked with me in peace and equity." By ceasing to honour God's word, the priests had lost their communion with God (they no longer "walked" with Him), their enjoyment of God (they were no longer at "peace" with Him), and their obedience to God (they were no longer marked by "equity", or righteousness).

In the second place, they "caused many to stumble at the law." Instead of "turning **many** away from iniquity" (V6), "ye have caused **many** to stumble at the law." To "depart out of the way" ourselves, can only have an adverse effect on others. See Romans 14, "Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother's way.....It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor anything whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak", V13 & 21. Christians can be stumbled by wrong doctrine. They can also be stumbled by a wrong example. We must "adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things", Titus 2: 10.

Their own infamous conduct, and its impact on other people, is summed up in the words, "Ye have corrupted the covenant of Levi."

(b) Their inevitable condemnation. "Therefore have I also made you contemptible (despised) and base before all the people, according as ye have not kept my ways, but have been partial in the law." They had "despised" His

name (1: 6). Now they were despised themselves. We must notice why they were despised. "According as ye have not kept My ways, but have been partial in the law." They were despised because of their hypocrisy. Once, "the law of truth was in his mouth". Now, "ye.....have been partial in the law", V9. People who compromise the word of God, will forfeit respect. "If the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? It is henceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot **of men**", Matthew 5: 13. Even newspaper columnists censure so-called Christian leaders for failing to maintain Biblical standards! Unsaved people may disagree and oppose us, but they still expect us to be true to what we say we believe. They are not impressed if we compromise for the sake of popularity.

We should notice the words, "ye have not kept my ways, but have been **partial in the law.**" Gesenius (**Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon**) puts it like this: "partial in (enforcing) the law.' The priests were not even-handed in applying God's word. They enforced what suited them, and forgot the rest. The warning for us is clear. We must teach and maintain "all the counsel of God", Acts 20: 27. That can be relatively easy when everything is going well, but it can be most difficult in stormy conditions. For example, good Bible-loving and Bible-teaching people have been known to change their minds under family pressure. Changing assembly attitudes can be a stumblingblock. After all, it's not too difficult to faithfully teach New Testament principles of gathering when everybody in the assembly agrees with you, but what happens when that isn't the case, and unpopularity lurks on the horizon? It is all too easy to alter our teaching to suit our company.

Notice what James says about partiality. See 2: 1-4. We must be careful that **we** don't have 'one law for the rich, and another for the poor!' Some Christians are quick to criticise the shortcomings of people they **don't** like, and quick to excuse the same shortcomings in the lives of people they **do** like! We can be partial in another way as well. We can be quick to criticise the faults of other people, and conveniently forget our **own** faults! See Matthew 7: 3-5.

Consistency is not easy, but it is so necessary. Jeremiah was told, "diminish not a word", 26: 2. God says the same to us as well.

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