

Warning to Repent

(sin; repentance)

MALACHI 2 1-9

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The current issue of TIME magazine has a striking picture on the front cover. It is a picture of David Koresh of the Branch Davidians recently incinerated in the fire at his Waco, Texas cult compound.

In an almost surrealistic effect there is the juxtaposition of a close-up of Koresh, flames of fire, and words from the book of Revelation of the Bible.

As a Christian who holds the Scriptures to be very important and sacred it hurts to see something so precious as God's words put in connection with something so bizarre as the Branch Davidians.

Throughout the article words from Revelation are used as the visual unifying element.

Whether the editors meant it this way or not - it conveys the sense that the Scriptures are somehow behind such behavior.

The Word of God is held in the same contempt as a self-immolating cult.

As it is written "God's name is blasphemed because of you."

Christianity suffered even greater embarrassment when Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart fell in disgrace from their lofty positions of influence.

Though we differed on style and even on some practices, nonetheless, Baker and Swaggart were one with us - they were proclaiming the same Christ, the same salvation, and the same Bible.

It felt like God himself was being ridiculed when Swaggart held up his Bible and used God's name to rationalize his actions while rebelling against godly authority.

As it is written "God's name is blasphemed because of you."

Is it possible that Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart are just larger than life versions of some of us?

That is a fairly negative way to start a sermon but God in Malachi 2 challenges his people with some more very hard words.

The book of Malachi, in some ways, reminds me of the first three chapters of Revelation.

In Revelation God speaks to seven churches and in almost every situation he affirms them but then adds, "But I have something against you."

In Malachi God begins with a resounding affirmation of his love for his people (as we saw in 1:1-5 two weeks ago) then as we saw last week he begins to point out the issues in their lives that are a contradiction of their relationship to Him.

In the last part of chapter one he points out their dishonoring of God by their thoughtless and worthless worship.

A couple of weeks from now when we resume this study in Malachi, we will see in the latter part of chapter two, God's indictment of their marriage relationships - specifically divorce and marriage to non-Christians.

This week in the first part of chapter two, we will see God's warning to the leaders of the people.

This morning I want us to see first his warning, secondly I want us to see the comparison between what God has called leaders to be and what some of them were, and thirdly I want us to see his call to repentance.

In these verses God is calling leaders to return to a commitment to honor God through lives and teaching consistent with his word.

I. What is the warning itself? READ 2:1-3

A. Who is the warning to? Specifically he says, this admonition, this warning is for you "priests".

These are not Roman, Eastern, Russian or Anglican priests - these are the descendants of Levi and Aaron, the Sons of Jacob, who were named by God as the religious leaders of the Israelites.

Their job was not only to administer the sacrifices in the Temple but also to teach the people the word of God.

There were very specific instructions given about the kind of men these teachers were to be and the kinds of lives they were to live.

Now it is easy to see that Christian Pastors are the New Testament counterpart to these Old Testament priests - and that this warning is to present-day pastors and elders as well.

I think it is appropriate to make that kind of application.

But I believe, without any stretch, it is right to apply this warning to any Christian who exercises influence over others.

That would include parents, teachers, leaders, - in fact it would include every Christian because God has called everyone of us to

exercise influence on others - to be salt and light in this world.

So this warning is for everyone of us but I do want those of us who teach to take particular note.

B. What is the essence of God's charge in the warning? READ 3b
"You have not set your heart to honor me."

To get an idea of what "setting your heart" means listen to these words from elsewhere in the Scriptures:

Jesus said, Don't set your heart on physical things like what you will eat or drink, or what you wear.

The Psalmist wrote, "don't set your heart on riches."
and he said, Do set your heart on God's laws.

Of King Jehoshaphat it is said, "He sought God, his heart was devoted to the ways of the Lord.

Of King Rehoboam it was said, He did not set his heart to seek the Lord and he did evil.

To "set your heart to honor God" is to "Make up your mind", or "determine beforehand", to "give careful thought and serious consideration" to knowing and living for God.

God's charge against the leaders is that they did not set their hearts to honor God.

Their relationship to God was incidental to what was more important in life to them.

Their role as a teacher/leader of God's people, their role as an influence on other people for God was secondary to the other concerns of life.

In the 5th through 9th verses God describes this more fully as he draws out a comparison between those who have "set their hearts to honor God' and those who have not. We'll look more at that in a minute.

C. But before we do I want you to see how seriously God takes this matter. I want you to see the severity of the warning: READ 2:2-3

For not "setting your heart to honor God", God says he will curse them and curse their blessings.

There are two related issues here.

When God put these people into leadership he made a covenant with them. If they would honor God by their lives and teaching, God would

bless them with both physical and spiritual good.

In Deuteronomy 28 those blessings are spelled out.

But God also said that if they would not honor him they would experience his severe discipline - the curses.

In this verse in Malachi, God says that the leaders themselves will experience those curses on their lives for their failure to honor him.

But the second thing he says is that He will curse their blessings.

Their role as a leader of the people was to teach and live in such a way that others would follow God. They were empowered by God to pronounce blessings on the people - blessings that God would honor.

But now, God says, when you pronounce your blessing on them I will not only not grant the blessing, I will send a curse instead.

It would be safer for the people not to have those leaders doing anything in their midst, not even blessing them.

A parent, a leader, a teacher in our church who is not setting his/her heart to honor God is not just a neutral influence - God says they are worse than nothing. They are a negative influence.

But that is not all God says about how seriously he takes this matter.

In verse 3 God says, "because of you I will rebuke your descendants".

The Hebrew can be translated loosely as either stopping the growth of the number of your descendants or stopping the growth of your crops.

In either case it is a curse on the leaders.

Applying it to ourselves it means leaders who do not set their hearts to honor God will have no effectiveness in their ministries.

The text goes on to say that God will take the feces from their animal sacrifices and spread it on their faces and throw them out with the intestines.

In offering animal sacrifices the priests were to carefully separate the entrails, the guts from the meat.

The intestines and feces were not to be offered.

They were to be taken outside of the city and burned as trash.

Imagine the picture, a priest is smeared with the animal feces and then dumped outside the city with the rest of the garbage.

God says, if you dishonor me I will dishonor you.

If you disgrace me before others, I will disgrace you.

I have had friends in the ministry who recently, because of their dishonoring God, have been removed from their place of influence, their names are remembered now for moral failure, their families have been shamed and scarred, and their children will live with that disgrace for the rest of their lives.

God takes his honor very seriously. He is not to be trifled with. No one is to take his name or especially teach or influence others in his name without setting their heart to honor God - it is to be their highest priority.

II. After seeing the warning itself, I want you to look with me now at the comparison God draws between what He has called leaders to be and what some of them were.

In verses 5-7 God gives the character and job description of a godly leader. In verses 8-9 he describes, in contrast, what some of the leaders were doing.

Let's look first at God's desire for leaders: READ 5b-7

I find three things that characterize this godly leader:

1. First, he reveres God.

He is so aware of the greatness, glory and worth of God that he stands in awe of God. God's personality has captured his attention - honoring God has become his life's ambition.

2. Secondly, he knows God's word and he teaches it accurately.

Look at verse 7: "the lips of a priest/leader ought to preserve knowledge" It ought to be expected by children of their parents, by students of their teachers, and parishioners of their elders and pastors, that they are serious students of God's Word - that these leaders work hard at knowing what God says.

The primary means that God has ordained for changing lives is His Word.

In 2 Tim 3:2-4 Paul describes what people are like.

The description is as true today as then.

And Paul is not describing the world around us but in these verses is describing people who claim to be Christians.

If Paul wants this leader Timothy, to whom he is writing, to do something to change these conditions, I would expect Paul at this point to indicate the most powerful spiritual weapon Timothy could use to turn people around. And what weapon is it? The Scriptures: Preach and teach the Word, Timothy.

God says, curses on us if we are leaders and don't study the Word and teach it.

People should expect to hear Bible truth from leaders.
Children have the right to expect Bible truth from their parents.
Students in the 4 year old class, the 6th grade class, the 11th grade class,
or the adult classes have the right to expect Bible truth from their
teachers.

The third thing that characterizes these godly leaders is in verse 6:
"They walk with me in peace and uprightness and turn many from sin."

Not only did they know the word of God they personally lived it.

It is written of Ezra that he devoted himself to the study and observance of the
Law of the Lord.

Paul wrote to Timothy, "Watch your life and doctrine closely, Persevere in them,
because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers."

They were careful to live above reproach.
They would abstain from all forms of evil, even the ones considered
insignificant by others - their hearts were set to honor God.

Now in the 8th and 9th verses we see instead what some of the leaders were like:
This is a sad description: READ

First, They were not following God.
They had the same standards or lack of them as the world had.
Their attitudes, their habits, their language, their goals and aspirations
were no different than those around them.
They were to use Jesus' words, "blind guides".

Second, They were supposed to be leaders of a better way, of a godly way but they
were teaching mostly by example in ways that were leading their children, their
students, their friends away from God.

Parents and youth leaders, you can't personally suck in the sewage of much of
the motion picture industry and then pretend you can lead children to godliness.

Parents and teachers you can't personally disobey God and expect your
children or students to do anything other.

Jesus said, "If anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it
would be better for him to have a large stone hung around his neck and be
drowned in the sea." Did he feel strongly about the subject?

Third, in summary they were corrupting the covenant God had with them:
The agreement was that they would lead and teach people to honor God but by

their teaching and their example they despised God.

God says again, therefore I will despise you and humiliate you.

III. But please hear as the third and final part of this warning from God what he spells out in verse 4: READ

God's desire is for repentance, for change.

He warns them and us so that we may see our sin of dishonoring God and turn to truly honoring him.

As I said last week, God doesn't say all of this just so he can blast them - he graciously, though not gently, gives a very stern warning - he loves them and he loves you and me. He calls us to change.

I think it may be time for some of us who have leadership, teaching, parenting responsibilities to check our hearts - and to reset our hearts to honor God.

It may mean some significant changes in our lifestyles.

It may mean some confession of carelessness and disregard for God.

It may mean some reordering of priorities.

It will certainly mean a reappraisal of the great responsibility we bear as teachers and leaders of God's people.