

The Question of Honour

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[0 : 00] Well, these days our culture tends to view any kind of authority with suspicion.! We're really sensitive to the misuse of authority and the imbalance of power.

! And it's because we have seen or worse, we've experienced ourselves bad leadership, bad power and authority misused, perhaps to manipulate or to cause harm to other people.

And as a consequence, leadership is often treated with suspicion and often regarded as dangerous. But leadership shouldn't always be viewed in that way, because leadership failure doesn't mean leadership itself is bad, but just that some leaders fail and some leaders are bad.

And sadly, this is common in the church. It's not just out there in the world where we see bad and poor leadership. And this has been something that sadly has been around over recent years, where there have been a variety of different failures when it comes to Christian leaders.

And they've come to light and there have been public scandals within the church. And the scandals have been so bad that despite being within the church, they've been picked up in mainstream media because of the appalling nature of some of what has gone on.

[1 : 20] So there have been serious abuses of power and of position. One Christian author writing about leadership says this. He says leaders have misused their authority not to feed the flock of God, but rather to feed on it.

And so abuses of authority and Christian leadership have ranged from hurtful leadership behavior misuse of funds coercive and domineering leadership harassment through to criminal activity such as physical and sexual abuse.

And so in the church unhealthy leadership is dangerous and healthy leadership is vital. Now you would notice from our Bible reading in Malachi chapter two that it is addressed to the leaders of Israel, where the Lord rebukes the priests for they were the leaders of Israel.

He rebukes them for their failure and doing their job properly, and he confronts them on their unfaithfulness and he warns them of his curse. And so it's a message that is directed to the leaders of God's people because leadership failure is always damaging for everybody.

And so the unfaithfulness of the priests in Malachi's day is contrasted in this passage with the faithfulness of the priesthood from an earlier time. And so there's a contrast here between unfaithful leadership and faithful leadership.

[2 : 55] And so with this strong rebuke, the Lord himself is commanding the priests to change their ways. And as we read this today, we're reminded to be aware of the failure and the failures of unfaithful leadership, but also to seek the features of faithful leadership.

And so this afternoon, we're going to look at this passage under three headings. First of all, the rebuke for the leaders, verse one to four. Secondly, the failures of unfaithful leadership in verse eight to nine.

And then thirdly, the features of faithful leadership in verse five to seven. So if you've got your Bible open, look down at verse one to four as we see the rebuke for the leaders.

Verse one, and now you priests, this warning is for you. So the priests had a job to do, but they failed. Now, before we direct lines from the priests of Israel to the leaders of the church today, we should note that there are differences.

So the priests in the Old Testament basically had two main functions. One of those functions was a sacrificial role. So last time in chapter one, we saw how they offered defiled food on the altar to God, because part of their job was to bring sacrificial offerings, animal sacrifices to the Lord for the people's sin.

[4 : 20] But of course, this is no longer necessary. We don't need to sacrifice animals to receive forgiveness for our sins. So the priesthood in that sense is basically defunct because Jesus, our

priest, has fulfilled this role through his once for all sacrifice for our sin.

And you can read more about that in Hebrews chapter seven and eight. So that's one function. The priests had a sacrificial role. Second function of the priests was an instructive role or a teaching role.

And the priests had this job of teaching the people the law of God. In verse seven, the priest was the messenger of the Lord. So God's people have always needed leaders to instruct them in God's ways.

And that's why Malachi two, verse one to nine continues to apply to us because we all need God's instruction. But it applies particularly and especially to those in positions of leadership within the church, because that is the primary responsibility of a church leader.

It is to teach and instruct from God's word. And so if you're thinking, OK, that's not me. That's for Jonathan or for David or for Neil or Martin or whoever.

[5 : 44] That's for ministers. It's got nothing to do with me. Well, the point is we all need to be instructed in God's ways. And so we all need to be in a church where the word of God is faithfully proclaimed to us.

And we should expect nothing less from our leaders, which means we should be encouraging our leaders to keep preaching and teaching God's word. But we should also hold our leaders accountable if they aren't preaching and teaching God's word, because the health of the church, this church or any church depends on faithfulness to the word of God.

So if the leader is not teaching the word of God, the people will never grow as God wants them to grow. Well, let's see then the warnings that the Lord gives to the leaders of Israel.

So first, God says he will curse the priests. Look at verse two. If you do not listen and you do not resolve to honor my name, says the Lord Almighty, I will send a curse on you and I will curse your blessings.

Yes, I have already cursed them because you have not resolved to honor me. So the primary word there is curse, isn't it? And we've already seen in chapter one how both priests and people failed to honor God.

[7 : 01] And so God's curse will be on the priests who have allowed the people to fail to honor. God and it's strong language here, but it basically alludes to God's covenant with his people.

And when God set up his covenant, he said that our covenant blessings, if you obey and that our covenant curses, if you disobey. And so in Deuteronomy chapter eight, a long, long chapter, I think six to eight verses, you can read all of the covenant blessings and all of the covenant curses.

And so, for example, Deuteronomy 28 verse 20, we read the Lord will send on you curses. Same word here in Malachi chapter two, verse two.

The Lord will send you curses, confusion and rebuke and everything you put your hand to until you are destroyed and come to sudden ruin because of the evil you have done and forsaking him.

So God is giving a stern warning in Deuteronomy to his people and here to his leaders for failing to keep the covenant, for failing to be faithful to what God calls them to do and to be.

[8 : 11] And so God is saying here in Malachi chapter two, the priests will be cursed basically if they don't get their act together. And if it wasn't bad enough, the blessings that the priests pronounced because blessings, that was part of their job.

The blessings would also be turned into curses. And so the priests weren't just putting themselves in danger here. They were also putting the people in harm's way as well.

And so God's curse, God's warnings here should have led the priests to repentance. But we read in verse two that God had already cursed them.

So there was more to come. Verse three says, because of you, I will rebuke your descendants. I will smear dung. Sorry, I will smear on your faces the dung from your festival sacrifices and you'll be carried off with it.

Now, where descendants here is the word seed. And so it could refer to biological seed as in children. It could also refer to agricultural seed as in crops.

[9 : 20] And so the severity here of God's judgment basically, I think, indicates both. In Deuteronomy 28, the crops were cursed. The children were cursed. Everything was cursed for people who disobeyed God.

And so the covenant curses impact everything. And the point is that the sin of the people had repercussions. And so for the priests, the sin of the priests had repercussions for their future.

Their families as well as their resources would be cursed. Because God is angry with his people for failing to be faithful to him.

And so he promises to smear dung on the dung of their sacrifices on their faces. Now, dung. You're wondering what is dung? You should know what dung is.

It translates the word for awful. So that's the parts of the sacrificed animal that were to be taken and burnt, like the internal organs, the entrails, as well as the excrement.

[10:25] And God's saying this will be smeared on the faces of the priests. And this was the ultimate humiliation. But more significantly, it would bar the priests from actually doing their job and fulfilling their responsibilities.

Because they would be ceremonially unclean. They would be unfit for serving God in the temple with this stuck on their faces. But what's even worse than that is that just as the dung would be carried off for disposal after the animal had been burnt and was ready for sacrifice.

God's saying here, you priests will also be carried off for disposal. You'll be demoted. You will be discarded. You also will be thrown on the dung heap.

And so it was a damning indictment on those who were supposed to represent God to the people. But God's saying, you're no longer fit for purpose.

Now this rebuke and this rejection didn't mean that God was giving up on his people. It means he was rebuking the leaders of his people.

[11:38] And so verse 4 says, And you will know that I have sent you this warning so that my covenant with Levi may continue, says the Lord Almighty. So yes, the priests had violated the covenant.

But God would keep his covenant with his people. If the priests didn't repent, they'd be cursed, they'd be carried off. But God's covenant would continue.

Because in his mercy, the Lord gave the priests the opportunity to change their ways. This was a rebuke to warn them to do something. And so just as we pause and before we move on, what does this tell us about God and what God is like?

Because if you're here today and you maybe are new to Christianity or new to the Bible, the Bible is telling us what God is like and it's pointing us to Jesus. And so what this is reminding us about God is that God is faithful, that God makes a covenant with people.

And he continues to be faithful to that covenant, even if his people are unfaithful. And so whether you're a Christian or not.

[12:51] Well, we've got to take God's warnings seriously, haven't we? Because God's warnings should wake us up of our need to turn from our wrong ways and to turn back to him.

Because God graciously invites us to come back to him. He invites us to receive his forgiveness and to change our ways. But the problem here in Malachi is that the priesthood was such a disgrace that it didn't look like they were willing to do that.

And so what God does is he reminds the priests of what the priesthood should be. And so we're going to come back to this in our third point. But first, let's have a look secondly at the failures of unfaithful leadership.

Because here's where the warning continues to apply to us today. So first, the rebuke for the leaders. Second, the failures of unfaithful leadership. So jumping down to verse eight and nine. But you have turned from the way and by your teaching have caused many to stumble. You have violated the covenant with Levi, says the Lord Almighty. So I have caused you to be despised and humiliated before all the people because you have not followed my ways, but have shown partiality in matters of the law.

[14:07] So the priests had violated the covenant, but we should learn from their leadership failures. So firstly, it's clear they had turned away from God.

Verse eight. But you have turned from the way. Verse nine. You have not followed my ways, says the Lord. So they had abandoned their calling. They had abandoned their responsibilities.

They were supposed to live by God's law. They were supposed to teach God's law. But they had rejected God's law themselves.

And so if they didn't obey God's law as the leaders of God's people, there's not much chance of the people ever learning God's law or obeying God's law. And from chapter one, which we looked at last week, it seems like the priests still went through all the motions.

They did the religious observance bit. So they turned up at the temple. They offered the sacrifices. They probably still dressed in all their robes and their garments.

[15:13] And yet, despite all of this good outward show of religion, God says that they have turned from the way. And it's always been the same with leaders, the leaders of God's people.

Leaders can look like leaders. They can wear all the right robes, the dog collar, whatever else. They can go through all the right motions in public.

But because they've turned from God's ways, God's warning is you're dangerous and you need to change. Because leaders who turn from God's way actually do more harm than good to God's people.

And we see this in the second failure because they're basically false teachers. So verse eight, by your teaching, you've caused many to stumble. Verse nine, you've shown partiality in matters of the law.

And so because the priests did not faithfully teach the law of God, they caused many to stumble. And this comes up all the way through the book of Malachi, where the people, first of all, aren't convinced that God actually loves them.

[16:28] God has to tell them he loves them. But then also they show contempt for God's name. They offer defiled sacrifices to God. They break their marriage covenants with one another.

They weary God with their words. They rob God by withholding their offerings. They speak arrogantly against God. These are all the charges that God brings against his people.

And all of this was happening under the watch of these priests. And so their failure to instruct the people caused all kinds of problems.

People were stumbling into all kinds of sin and rebellion and mess. And the priests were showing verse nine partiality in matters of the law.

And so whether this was partiality to the law itself, like picking and choosing which parts of the law they decided to teach people, or whether this was showing partiality to certain people, like administering the law with injustice so that it would benefit some people more than it would benefit other people.

[17:34] Or maybe even partiality to people over God. Because the fear of man and human beings had replaced their fear of God.

Or perhaps it was all of it. The point is that they had neglected their duty to faithfully teach God's law. And so what was the result? It was absolute chaos amongst the people.

People did not have a clue. And that is why false teaching within the church is always so dangerous. Because it leads people away from God.

And it destroys churches. And it brings shame on the name of Jesus Christ. Because leaders, of course, have followers. And so the potential for damage with a bad leader is so much greater.

Now, I know that some of us have lived through this with the demise of the Church of Scotland, which is the established church in our land. During my ministry, I've witnessed how leaders have turned from the way.

[18:41] And because they've turned from the way and they've stopped teaching the word of God, then they have caused many people to stumble. Not all, thankfully, but many.

And probably the most obvious outworking of this has been in the false teaching in the Church of Scotland over human sexuality. Where people have seen church leaders living in a way that is contrary to the word of God.

And so they think, oh, these leaders are nice people. They're doing this. Well, surely this is okay for us. But any leader who disobeys God by pursuing a sinful lifestyle will only encourage other people to disobey God and pursue a similar sinful lifestyle.

And Jesus warned about how dangerous this was. We saw it in the Sermon on the Mount. He warned about false prophets who would come in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they would be ferocious wolves.

In fact, some of Jesus' most strongest words are to those who would cause people to stumble. Listen to what Jesus says in Matthew 18. If anyone causes one of these little ones, those who believe in me, to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

[20:04] The reality is for leaders that leaders will be judged far more strictly because they teach. And the consequences for false teaching and bad leadership are far greater.

And so these are the failures of unfaithful leadership in Malachi. And God's warnings, you notice, are so strong. Why? Well, because there's so much at stake. But thankfully, God speaks through Malachi, not just to give us the failures of unfaithful leadership, but the features of faithful leadership. And so that's our third point. First, the rebuke of the leaders. Second, the failures of unfaithful leadership. And thirdly, let's look at the features of faithful leadership. And this is in verse five to seven. But let's read from verse four. And you will know that I have sent you this warning so that my covenant with Levi may continue, says the Lord Almighty. My covenant was with him, a covenant of life and peace. [21 : 08] And I gave them to him this call for reverence. And he revered me and stood in awe of my name. True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips.

He walked with me in peace and uprightness and turned many from sin. For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge because he is the messenger of the Lord Almighty. And people seek instruction from his mouth. So this is God giving the people and the priests a picture of what the priesthood should be. And so this phrase, my covenant with Levi, is referring to the ideal era of Israel's priesthood. When God entered into a covenant with the tribe of Levi and things were going well and the priests were good.

So Levi was the ancestor of the priests. And so for example, in Israel's history, the Levites, back in the Exodus, the Levites were the tribe who showed commitment to God. [22 : 12] Because when the people worshiped the golden calf, the Levites didn't. And so Moses said to them, you have been set apart to the Lord today.

For you were against your own sons and daughters and he has blessed you this day. So the Levitical priesthood, the priests in the tribe of Levi were faithful to God. And similarly, a man called Phinehas, who was the son of Aaron, of the priestly tribe of Levi. He was zealous for the honor of God when the Moabites and other people tried to seduce Israel. And so the Lord commanded Phinehas by saying, I'm making my covenant of peace with him. He and his descendants will have a covenant of a lasting priesthood because he was zealous for the honor of his God and made atonement for the Israelites.

You can read about Phinehas in Numbers chapter 25. It's actually the first incident of a human kebab in the Bible. So you can read more about that later. [23 : 18] But the point is, here is Phinehas from the tribe of Levi and he had zeal for the Lord. He was committed to the Lord. And here the Levites, when the golden calf is being worshiped, they have commitment to the Lord.

And so God is reminding the priests in Malachi's day what they should be, but what they weren't because they had not fulfilled their calling and their responsibilities as priests. And so in verse five to seven, God is reminding them of what faithful leadership should be. So let me just highlight four features of this. In verse five, first of all, they had a right fear of God. My covenant was with him, a covenant of life and peace, and I gave them to him. This called for reverence and he revered me and stood in awe of my name.

So relationship with God for God's leaders should involve revering him, standing in awe of his name. But what happened to these priests? [24 : 23] Well, they had failed to honor God and didn't fear his name. And so this is vital in any spiritual leadership. Without a right fear of the Lord, there can be no leading for God.

Second feature of faithful leadership is there in verse six, and it's a right handling of God's word. True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips. So instruction is the word Torah and priests were responsible for teaching the Torah, which meant instructing people in God's law.

And so whether back then or now leaders are called to instruct people in God's word. True instruction, we read, is to be in their mouths. Nothing false is to be found on their lips. A leader should only teach what is revealed in God's word. The primary responsibility of a leader is to faithfully expound God's word, all of it, and apply it to life. [25 : 34] Whether it's popular or not, whether it seems relevant or not, because this is how God chooses to advance his kingdom and to grow his church in this world.

And yet sadly, so many leaders lose confidence in the teaching and preaching of God's word because they think it's not going to work.

And so they spend time trying 101 other things, thinking that will change people's lives and that will grow the church.

And as part of this, there's a need to guard the truth of God's message too. So verse 7 says, for the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge.

Preserving knowledge simply means guarding the truth. Why does the truth need to be guarded?

Well, because people have always tried to twist and distort God's word.

[26 : 31] And so it's got to be preserved and it's got to be passed on because what God has said doesn't ever change. And so leaders will continually need to defend the truth of God's word against error.

Because people always seek to revise what the Bible says and will reject certain parts of it. And yet it's the responsibility of the leaders of the church to preserve the message.

And it's what the Apostle Paul said to Titus when he said he must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.

So leaders must hold firmly to the apostolic gospel, to the message we find in the Bible, ensuring that that they don't drift from it themselves as leaders, but nor do they let others twist the message or draw others away with their lies.

Because speaking of the priest, the Lord says in verse seven, He is the messenger of the Lord Almighty and people seek instruction from his mouth. So the priests were to teach the people.

[27 : 46] God's way has always been he will appoint messengers to teach his people his truth. And again, the Apostle Paul says of Christ himself that he gave pastors and teachers to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ might be built up.

And then there's a third feature of faithful leadership, and it's a right walk with God. Verse six, he walked with me in peace and uprightness.

So the priests weren't simply to instruct God's people in God's ways. They also had to live God's ways out themselves. And they'd reveal themselves as faithful leaders, not merely by their lips, but by their lives.

You could look on and watch and see whether they were faithful. It wasn't just about talking the talk. It was about walking the walk. And it's the same for leaders today. And the Apostle Paul said to Timothy, Set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers. Which then leads to the final feature, the fourth feature of faithful leadership.

[29 : 09] And it's our right outcome. Verse six, what happens with true instruction? Well, it turns many from sin. That's what faithful leadership should do.

People should be turning from sin and towards God. Faithful leadership should be leading people to God and into heaven, as opposed to unfaithful leadership, which leads people away from God and into hell.

And so, undoubtedly, all leaders, whether secular leaders or church leaders, all leaders will have an influence on people. It will be a bad influence or it will be a good influence, but it will be an influence nevertheless.

And so, what should we seek? Well, we should seek faithful leaders who fear God, who handle God's word correctly, who walk with God, and who turn people from sin.

So, just as we wrap things up, can you see how the Lord's warnings here are serious? Leaders will either dishonor God or honor God, which means we too will either dishonor God or we will honor God.

[30 : 28] We will be unfaithful to him or we will be faithful to him. And so, every leader of God's people should feel a challenge. And of course, no leader will ever be perfect.

And yet, while leaders are called to instruct us in the word of God, people are called to live it out. And we are well aware that we are not as faithful to the Lord as we should be.

And so, we need help. What we need is a perfect leader who not only teaches us God's ways, but who lives out God's ways perfectly to show us how we should live out God's ways.

But more than that, we need a teacher and a leader who forgives us when we fail to live God's ways. And there is only one who meets the bill, and it's Jesus Christ, who the Bible calls our great high priest.

Because when you think about it, Jesus alone perfectly revered God. True instruction was always in his mouth.

[31 : 40] He walked in peace and uprightness. He turned many from sin. Jesus is the messenger of the Lord, who is God himself.

And that's why he is the perfect, the ideal, the true, the better priest, who not only made sacrifice for our sin like the priests in the Old Testament, but he himself was the sacrifice for our sin.

Jesus bore our curse. So as the high priest who truly meets our need, he is holy, blameless, pure, set apart for sinners. And Jesus, just like the dung and the priests were carried off, so Jesus was carried off outside the city to die on a cross, taking the shame and the defilement of our sin on himself.

So God treated Jesus as unfaithful, so he could declare us as faithful. And Jesus is still our great high priest, who not only offered himself to die, but he was resurrected and sat down at the right hand of the throne of the majesty in heaven.

And now through the Holy Spirit, he continues to teach us. He continues to instruct us so that we might know God's way. And so we don't need priests anymore.

[33 : 10] But Peter says of all God's people that you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

What does that mean? Well, it means every believer is to declare the good news of Jesus by our words, our lips, but also by our actions in our lives.

And so may our prayer be that God would be honored amongst us, so that as his word is faithfully proclaimed, people would turn from their sin and trust in Jesus as their savior.

Right here in this church, in this city and throughout this world. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray.