

March 29 Lesson 5 (NIV)

NEED FOR JUST LEADERS

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 50:1–15

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Malachi 2; 3

MALACHI 2:1–9

¹“And now, you priests, this warning is for you. ²If you do not listen, and if 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.

³“Because of you I will rebuke your descendants; I will smear on your faces the dung from your festival sacrifices, and you will be carried off with it. ⁴And you will know that I have sent you this warning so that my covenant with Levi may continue,” says the LORD Almighty. ⁵“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. ⁶True 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.

⁷“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. ⁸But 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. ⁹“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.”

MALACHI 3:5, 6

⁵“So I will come to put you on trial. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive the foreigners among you of justice, but do not fear me,” says the LORD Almighty.

⁶“I the LORD do not change. So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed.”

KEY VERSE

“If you do not listen, and if 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.” —Malachi 2:2

JUSTICE AND THE PROPHETS

Unit 1: God Requires Justice

LESSONS 1–5

LESSON OUTLINE

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HOW TO SAY IT

ArtaxerxesAre-tuh-zerk-seez.

LevitesLee-vites.

LeviticalLeh-vit-ih-kul.

MalachiMal-uh-kye.

NehemiahNee-huh-my-uh.

PersiaPer-zhuh.

ShechemShee-kem or Shek-em.

Introduction

A. A Model for Leadership

In the late 1940s, Billy Graham's ministry was becoming well known. Graham realized that he needed to hold himself and his ministry to an extremely high standard of conduct for the sake of the gospel message he proclaimed. In 1948, Graham and his staff created what they called the "Modesto Manifesto." They pledged themselves to follow the highest standards of conduct in every area of their lives.

When the evangelist died in 2018, tributes to Graham poured in. Many of them cited his uncompromising integrity. Even those who did not accept Graham's message had to acknowledge that he was a man who practiced what he preached. During a time when many public figures were caught up in scandalous behavior, Graham remained a consistent model of faithfulness to Christ.

In the days of the prophet Malachi, the leaders of God's people took the polar opposite approach. What we might call "Malachi's Manifesto" exposed the corruption of these leaders and called attention to what God has always desired.

B. Lesson Context

Malachi mentions no kings at the beginning of his book. This makes establishing an approximate date for the prophet's ministry challenging. Even so, the book's contents offer some clues.

The issues addressed by Malachi are similar to those facing God's people in the time of Nehemiah in the fifth century BC. With permission from King Artaxerxes of Persia, Nehemiah had traveled from Persia to Judah around 445 BC to rebuild Jerusalem's walls.

Some issues addressed by both Nehemiah and Malachi include mixed marriages (Nehemiah 13:23–27; Malachi 2:11), the failure to tithe (Nehemiah 13:10–14; Malachi 3:8–10), and corrupt priests (Nehemiah 13:4–9; Malachi 1:6–2:9). These similarities point to a date for Malachi that is post-exilic. That means the setting is an era after the exile in Babylon ends in 538 BC (see Ezra 1:1–4).

Bolstering the conclusion that Malachi is post-exilic is the use of the title "governor" (Malachi 1:8). This was Nehemiah's official title (see Nehemiah 5:14; compare Haggai 1:1; 2:21); before the exile, Judah had kings, not governors. Based on these and other facts, scholars conclude that Malachi is chronologically the last of the prophets, of about 430 BC.

The Babylonian captivity occurred between the ministries of Micah (see lesson 4) and Malachi. The delinquent leadership against which Micah spoke so passionately had resurfaced in Malachi's day. And it was just as displeasing to the Lord in Malachi's time as it had been in Micah's.

I. Failing the Call **(MALACHI 2:1–9)**

Up to the point where our lesson text begins, Malachi has written in dialogue format. This involves first stating a proposition from the Lord or presenting a scenario, then anticipating a response. That response is followed by the Lord's rejoinder. Variations of this technique are found throughout the book. This is Malachi's method of challenging his audience to rethink their practices and alter their way of living.

A. Hear the Lord (vv. 1–4)

1. "And now, you priests, this warning is for you."

At the point where our lesson begins, Malachi has already said much about the poor quality of leadership demonstrated by the *priests*. When the prophet first mentions the priests, he describes them as despising the Lord's name (Malachi 1:6). The priests are abusing their sacred office by offering defective, unacceptable sacrifices (1:7, 8).

God has made it clear in the Law of Moses that only the best is to be brought to him in worship. In the case of animals, only those unblemished are to be brought (examples: Leviticus 1:3, 10; 3:1). But instead of finding delight in the privilege of preparing such offerings, these priests look on their work as a "burden" (Malachi 1:13). The *warning* about to be voiced is an invitation to hear God anew and repent. The verse before us therefore begins the transition from problem to solution—or consequences for allowing the problem to continue.

2. "If you do not listen, and if 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.

The Lord issues a solemn warning to the delinquent priests. Their ministry is intended to bring *honor* to the Lord's *name* (compare Matthew 15:7–9; 1 Timothy 6:16; Revelation 5:12, 13). He is the one they serve. The work they do is to be viewed as a privilege.

But if the priests are unwilling to *resolve* to take seriously what the Lord says, then the Lord will *send a curse on* them and even *curse* their *blessings* (compare Deuteronomy 11:26; 28:20; Jeremiah 13:17). This may refer to the blessing that the priests are to pronounce on the Israelites (Numbers 6:22–27). If so, then God will make that declaration null and void. The unfortunate truth is that unholy priests cause suffering for all the people.

Another possible interpretation is that God will curse the harvest so that the crops will not produce as they should. This happened in the time of Haggai nearly a century earlier (Haggai 1:5–11). Since the Law of Moses commands that a tithe of the harvest be given to the Levites (Numbers 18:21), a poor crop means a reduced provision for them. (We remind ourselves that all priests were Levites but not all Levites were priests.)

Referring to God as *the Lord Almighty*, which literally means "Lord of hosts," emphasizes his power, especially as a warrior in prophetic books (examples: Isaiah 10:24–26; Jeremiah 11:20; Nahum 2:13). So serious is the heart condition of these priests and the shameful conduct that is the outcome, God says he has *already cursed* their blessings.

3. "Because of you I will rebuke your descendants; I will smear on your faces the dung from your festival sacrifices, and you will be carried off with it.

Sinful behavior of a person or group often has consequences for their *descendants* (example: 1 Kings 14:9, 10). God declared this to be so in his instructions that accompanied the second commandment (Exodus 20:4, 5).

The Lord's *rebuke* is depicted in a most shocking manner. Normally the *dung* of animals that are sacrificed, along with the contents of their intestines, is to be taken outside the camp of the Israelites and burned (Exodus 29:14; Leviticus 4:11, 12). To have dung on one's face is to be massively dishonored. The language is probably not to be viewed in literal, physical terms. Rather, it is a way of vividly describing how repulsed the Lord is by the priests' conduct.

4. "And you will know that I have sent you this warning so that my covenant with Levi may continue," says the LORD Almighty.

The delinquent priests have forgotten, either through passive carelessness or by active intent, the roots of their sacred office and heritage. The priestly *covenant* goes back to Jacob's son *Levi*,

some of whose descendants are assigned the priesthood (Numbers 3:5–13). Anytime a role is inherited instead of earned by merit, the danger is greater that a person will simply go through the motions. Those of the Levitical priesthood are not immune to this pitfall.

B. Fear the Lord (vv. 5–7)

5. “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.

The special blessings promised to Levi were *life and peace*, spiritual blessings associated with the Levites’ special place in God’s service. Levi’s descendants in turn were to respond to these favors with *reverence*, expressed as grave respect for the godly tasks they were given (compare Hebrews 12:28, 29).

When one looks at the life of Levi himself, he does not appear to exemplify a great deal of fear toward the Lord. He and his brother Simeon misused the covenant sign of circumcision to avenge the cruel treatment of their sister, Dinah, by Shechem (Genesis 34; 49:5). The Lord’s words here perhaps describe what was true of Levi’s descendants when Moses pronounced his final blessing on that tribe (Deuteronomy 33:8–11). Later, the Levites did prove themselves to be a God-fearing tribe (see Exodus 32:25–29; Numbers 25:6–13).

6a. “True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips.

Three important responsibilities for priests are highlighted in this verse. First, they are to give *true instruction* faithfully (Deuteronomy 33:10). That involves communicating the Lord’s requirements to his people (17:9–13). *Nothing false* is to be *found* in a priest’s speech, a characteristic highly commended by James for the new covenant era (James 3:2).

6b. “He walked with me in peace and uprightness,

Second, the priest’s daily walk is to be consistent with his faith profession (compare Genesis 5:22). To be a person of *peace* goes hand in hand with loving God’s law (Psalm 119:165). The Hebrew word underneath the translation *uprightness* can also be translated “level” or “smooth” as opposed to “rough” (see Isaiah 40:4; 42:16), and that is the sense here. It indicates that the person is virtuous and lacks any deceit (compare John 1:47). The faithful priest exhibits high moral character (compare Psalm 25:21).

6c. “and turned many from sin.

Third, the faithful priest is dedicated to helping others (compare James 5:19, 20). The priest is to set the kind of example that draws others to follow and imitate his righteous lifestyle.

7. “For the lips of the priest ought to preserve knowledge, because he is the messenger of the LORD Almighty and people seek instruction from his mouth.

The priests in Malachi’s day neglect and even abuse the divinely given role they are called to fulfill: every priest is the Lord’s *messenger*. Priests are, in a very real sense, the Lord’s representatives to the people as those priests bring God’s message (examples: Ezra 7:11; Nehemiah 8). Priests are to look to him for the *knowledge* and *instruction* found only in his law (compare Leviticus 10:11).

C. Follow the Lord (vv. 8, 9)

8. “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.

The task of keeping *the covenant with Levi* means nothing to the delinquent priests (compare Jeremiah 2:8). Whether the problem is one of mere negligence or of active rebellion, the result is the same: *many people stumble* (compare 18:15; Hosea 4:6; Mark 9:42).

9. “So have I 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.”

This verse makes the case that the problem is not just one of negligence; if it were, the verse could stop with the phrase *you have not followed my ways*. The phrase *but have shown partiality in matters of the law* points to conscious, intentional disregard of God’s ways (compare, from the era of the judges, 1 Samuel 2:27–33). To be partial in applying the law is abhorrent to the Lord; frequent warnings against doing so are found within the Law of Moses (examples: Leviticus 19:15; Deuteronomy 16:19).

II. Renewing the Call **(MALACHI 3:5, 6)**

The Lord does not merely state a problem and stop there. He goes on to state the solution, which begins in Malachi 3:1 (not in today’s text): his “messenger” will “prepare the way” before him. John the Baptist is the one who will fulfill Malachi’s prophecy (Matthew 11:10).

Malachi goes on to speak about a second messenger’s coming, actions, and results. The refining and purifying mentioned fit Jesus’ work in raising up in his church those who will faithfully serve him (Malachi 3:3, 4). Though judgment will be brought against all individuals who have violated the covenant, the Levites are still called out specifically (3:3); as teachers, theirs is the greater accountability.

A. Trying Offenders (v. 5)

3:5a. “So I will come to put you on trial. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers,

This half-verse and the next elaborate on the judgment and *trial* to be carried out by the second messenger (see Malachi 3:2, not in today’s text). Sorcery and related practices are strictly forbidden in the Law of Moses (example: Deuteronomy 18:9–14). This prohibition in part prevents Israel from seeking to manipulate the Lord with “secret arts” and “spells” (examples: Exodus 7:11; Isaiah 47:9). Adultery violates the seventh commandment (Exodus 20:14; compare James 2:11; 2 Peter 2:12–14); to swear falsely breaks the ninth (Exodus 20:16; compare Leviticus 19:11, 12; Jeremiah 7:9).

5b. “against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive the foreigners among you of justice, but do not fear me,” says the LORD Almighty.

The Lord also calls to account all who take advantage of the most vulnerable in Israelite society. The Law of Moses included specific directives to care for each of these groups (examples: Leviticus 19:13; Deuteronomy 24:14–22).

Although *the laborers* and *the widows and the fatherless* are likely fellow Israelites, *the foreigners* refers specifically to those who do not belong to the covenant people by lineage. God shows a special concern for the foreigners who live in Israel. He calls his people to remember their

own time of oppression while they lived as foreigners in Egypt and to treat foreigners in their own land quite differently (Exodus 22:21).

Ultimately such disregard for these peoples in need and for the principles found in the Law of Moses can be traced to a lack of reverence for the lawgiver, the Lord himself (compare Deuteronomy 31:12, 13; Isaiah 1:2). The *fear* of the Lord has always been “the beginning of knowledge” (Proverbs 1:7); lack of such fear leads to certain ruin (example: James 5:1–6).

B. Unchanging God (v. 6)

6a. “I the LORD do not change.

God can change his mind (example: Jonah 3:10), but he does not change his character (see James 1:17). His standards of right and wrong always hold true. He will be consistent in carrying out judgment on those who violate these standards, as he has made abundantly clear throughout Scripture.

6b. “So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed.”

The *descendants of Jacob*, referring to the Israelites, have not been *destroyed* by God’s wrath—yet (compare Hosea 11:8, 9). The Lord is merciful because of his promises—and his unchanging character means he will keep those promises.

Conclusion

A. “Familiarity Breeds Contempt”

Malachi’s words should serve as sobering warnings to leaders in the church. Dangers abound when we become casual about doing God’s work. It’s a small step from an attitude of indifference to one of antibiblical rationalizing by those who serve the Lord in leadership positions. The late Dallas Willard once observed, “The greatest threat to devotion to Christ is service for Christ.”

Those who earn wages by serving the church or a parachurch ministry can come to see what they do merely as a source of income. They forget that theirs is a ministry done in service to the Lord and for his glory. Certain words and actions become part of the routine, of what is expected according to their job description. It’s a slippery slope.

One source of help may be for the leader to arrange to meet with a group of fellow leaders (either within or outside of the congregation) for mutual prayer and encouragement. Many have found such accountability groups greatly beneficial in keeping them spiritually sharp and providing valuable counsel when temptations or other challenges occur (compare Malachi 3:16).

Speaking honestly to one another can be of immeasurable value in avoiding the spiritual barrenness that brought God’s harsh criticism of the priests in Malachi’s day. Inviting candid feedback from a fellow servant of Christ is always preferable to being on the receiving end of God’s correction!

B. Prayer

Father, keep us from handling sacred duties in such a way that we lose sight of you. Empower our church to remember our covenant with you. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember
Working for God requires faithfulness.¹

¹ Redford, D., Eichenberger, J., & Lockhart, M. (2020). [Need for Just Leaders](#). In R. L. Nickelson, J. A. Kenney, M. K. Williams, & J. Gerke (Eds.), *The NIV Standard Lesson Commentary, 2019–2020* (Vol. 26, pp. 261–267). Colorado Springs, CO: Standard Publishing.