

The Mission of a Priest

Malachi 2a

So, what does this passage have to do with us? Well, as we learned from I Peter last week, all Christians are called to be a kingdom of priests, a holy nation, a people set apart in order to glorify God. And so, when Malachi condemns the Old Testament priests of his generation, we can't just assume that his criticisms don't apply to us.

And then in today's responsive reading, Jesus makes a similar point, doesn't He? For it isn't just the professional Christians, the pastors and elders who are in the public eye. No, all of us Christians are like a city on a hill, clearly visible to everyone around us. Regardless of our intentions, Christians cannot be hidden. Just like those Old Testament priests in their ceremonial robes, we stick out. Especially in the modern world, as our culture careens away from its moral and ethical roots, we Christians are increasingly set apart. We are different.

Or at least that's what we're called to be. And Malachi reminds the Old Testament priests in verse 4 that they had the same sort of calling on their lives, because God had made a covenant with their ancestor Levi. They were called to be holy, set apart, different from the world, and they didn't choose that calling any more than we did.

Now, we Americans love our freedom to make choices. We love to imagine that we are in charge of our lives and destinies. We hate to feel like a bunch of draftees. But before we object too strongly to our calling to be set apart, to be different from the world, let's look a little closer at that calling, at the covenant which God has made with His people.

For example, Malachi tells us in verse 5 that God has called His priests into a covenant of life. And that's certainly true for all of us Christians. After all, we were dead in our sins, but by virtue of our union with Christ, God has given us new life, resurrection life. Malachi also tells us that God has called us to a covenant of peace. And that's true too. For even though we have all rebelled against God through our sinful actions, God chose to make peace with us, reaching out to us in the coming of His Son, and pardoning us by the blood of His cross.

No, we did not choose to be in God's covenant, but why would we want to opt out of it? Who would choose war and death over life and peace? Who would reject God's amazing grace, offered to us just because He loved us so much?

Yes, looking at God's covenant that way, setting ourselves apart for Him and offering ourselves to Him as priests seems to be the least we can do. So, what does this job entail?

Well, we saw last week that priests are called to offer pure sacrifices to the Lord, and that the spiritual sacrifice we are called to offer consists of our very lives. But in today's passage, Malachi becomes more specific, explaining that this purity should extend to the words we say. After all, in verse 6 he makes it clear that the mouth of the priest should contain no words of injustice or sin. And why not? Remember – Jesus told us that we Christians are a city on a hill. That means the world is watching and listening to us all the time, trying to find out what we Christians are really like, and whether we are sincere about what we say.

And it turns out that the best way to keep from saying the things we shouldn't is to say the things we should. As Malachi tells us in verse 6, it is the Law of Truth that should be in our mouths. That means that, as priests of the Lord, we are to talk about what He says. We are to recount to one another the wonderful truths found in the Word of God, not just in Sunday School and during worship, but all the time. In fact, Paul told the Ephesians that Christians should speak to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, importing the language of worship even into our casual daily conversation (Ephesians 5:19).

Okay, so we know how the priests of the Lord should make an offering of pure speech. But how should we live? In verse 6, Malachi says that we should walk with God in peace and equity or uprightness. Of course, such a pure manner of life involves the avoidance of sinful activities. But it also means setting out to do things that are aimed at pleasing God.

And Malachi adds that one of the best things a priest can do is to turn other people away from sin. No, that doesn't mean turning ourselves into busybodies, sticking our noses into everybody else's business. Or does it?

You know, one of the the great benefits of living in a small town is that it's like we're all in a fishbowl: we all tend to know what kinds of problems each of us has. That makes it easy to pray for one another, but it also makes it hard to hold each other accountable for our sin. After all, if you turn to your neighbor and say, "You know you have a problem with drinking," he is likely to say to you, "Well, you waste too much money at the casino." And so, instead of helping each other with our problems, we tend to keep our mouths shut – knowing each other's business, but minding our own.

So how can we do the priestly thing, how can we do the Christian thing, and help turn others away from sin? Perhaps the key is found in verse seven – "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."

In other words, the best way for us to help others is to make sure that our ideas and words do not come out of our own imagination, but out of the Bible. And the more we know the Scriptures, and the more wisdom we have gained from them, the more likely people are to seek our advice: to listen to us and to value our words and even to make changes in the way they live – not because we say so, but because the Bible says so.

In short, the life of the priest is a life of worship. His words lift others up, his actions are designed to please God, and he is always seeking to be of service. He knows that he is never off-duty. He knows that the world is watching, so in everything he does, the priest's single-minded purpose is to give glory and honor to his Lord.

That's the covenant to which God has called every believer – to respond to His gracious pardon and welcome by loving Him with all our might, devoting ourselves completely to Him and His glory, giving our best to Him and to all those around us. So, are we doing this? Are we keeping His covenant? Or are we living as halfway Christians?

Last week we learned that the chief danger of being a halfway Christian is that when we give God less than our best, less than all we are and have, we are actually despising Him. Being a halfway Christian is thus a terrible sin. But there is another danger of giving less than our best to God. For if we place the focus of our lives on the blessings of God rather than on God Himself, we are in fact a danger to others. Just being a halfway Christian can cause others to stumble.

How can that be? Well, we all know what happens when any public Christian is caught in sin. We all know what happens when the preacher puts his hand in the offering plate. The whole world is confirmed in its opinion of the rest of us Christians – that we are all a bunch of hypocrites, that we are all insincere when we ask for donations for the poor, that we are all in the church business only for ourselves.

And we all know what happens when a preacher proclaims Biblical truth about marriage, but then falls into sexual sin himself. The whole world is confirmed in its opinion of Jesus and thus of the Bible. The world says, "Freud was right. Human beings are nothing more than rutting animals, helpless in the face of our passions. There is no real power in Christ to transform people's relationships or to deliver them from temptation."

So why do we think that it is only public Christians whose devotion to money or sex runs the risk of making others stumble? The whole church is a city on a hill. The whole world is watching all of us all the time. So as long as we claim the name of Christ while holding back any area of our lives from His authority, as long as we cling to any idol, whatever it might be, the world will simply look at us and say, "So, that's what Jesus is like. Well, I don't want any part of that!" And the world will die in its sin. Just like those Old Testament priests that Malachi condemned in verse 8, if we New Testament priests are departed out of the way, we will cause many to stumble at the law.

But there is another danger of harboring hypocrisy and engaging in idolatry. Malachi says in verse 3 that the Lord will corrupt our seed: that is, that He will rebuke our descendants. In other words, if we continue in the sinful practice of saying one thing and doing another, if we keep holding back from God what is rightfully His, if we continue to value God's blessings more than God Himself, our children will suffer.

And no, this doesn't mean that God is mean or vindictive. This is instead a tragic truth, and one we have seen over and over again throughout history as well as in our own experience. For the fact is that human beings are by nature imitators, and children naturally want to imitate their parents. So if our children see us living our lives for things other than God, if they hear us proclaiming our faith in Christ but then see our lives revolving around our jobs or our

pleasures, our drink or our leisure, our entertainments or our money, why should we expect them to live in a different way? Why should we expect them to value Christ more than we do?

No, if we go on living in such hypocrisy, claiming to worship God but actually living for the things He has made, we will drive both the unbelievers and our own children away from God. But we will also end up losing the very things we crave so desperately. For the sad truth is that idols always end up corrupting those who worship them.

And Malachi pulls no punches in making this point. After all, the Old Testament priests took great pride in the fact that people would come to them for words of blessing. And they jealously guarded their exclusive right to offer sacrifices on the Lord's altar, and thus their privilege to share in the feasts the Lord prescribed for His people. But in verse 2, God said He would turn their words of blessings into curses. In verse 3, God said He would rub the dung of their ceremonial feasts in their faces. The very things in which they took pride, the status and the privilege they prized more than the Lord Himself, would end up making them unclean, unfit and unable to perform their calling.

So what about us New Testament priests? What if we go on clinging to money or power, sex or success, entertainment or popularity, trusting those sorts of idols to give our lives meaning or to make us feel better? We will not only lose our ability to be the light of the world, as our hypocrisy renders us unable to convince unbelievers of the truth of Christ. We will also lose our capacity to be the salt of the earth. For if we ourselves have become unclean, if we have joined the world in giving ourselves over to idols, there is no way we can counteract the decaying effect that sin has on everyone and everything it touches. Like those Old Testament priests, our hypocrisy and idolatry will render us unable to fulfill our calling.

No, there's no way we can be the salt of the earth and the light of the world unless we ourselves are sold out for Christ. So, for the good of our neighbors, for the good of our children, and for the good of ourselves, let us give ourselves completely to God. For only then can we be that city on a hill, shining the light of Christ into the darkness and confusion of sin. Only then can we be the salt of the earth, showing the love of Christ ever more clearly to those who are trapped in the corruption and isolation of sin. Only then can we truly be the priests of the Lord.