

How have we corrupted God?

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[0 : 01] As we stand, let us pray. God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, give us your Holy Spirit, who writes the preached word into our hearts.

May we receive and believe it and be cheered and comforted by it now and in eternity. Glorify your word in our hearts and make it so bright and warm that we may find pleasure in it.

Through your Holy Spirit, think what is right and by your power, fulfill the word. For the sake of Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord.

Amen. Please be seated. That was Martin Luther's prayer that he used before preaching. And so I just want to let you know a little historical note here that this is the 500th anniversary year of the Reformation.

So a little dose of Luther here and there probably does our souls good. And this is a very Reformation kind of passage, actually. We'll see as it unfolds. Might not seem so to you on first reading, but it really is.

[1 : 09] So there we go. We're in our series in Malachi. So welcome back to it if you've been with us. And if you're new, we are in Malachi in chapter 2. You might want to have that open in front of you. Let me just say this is an extraordinary passage.

I agreed to preach on May 21st before the series was even set. Maybe it existed in the mind of God or the mind of David Short, but none of the rest of us knew that this was going to be Malachi.

And I agreed to preach on May 21st. Then Aaron Roberts emailed me because he had been delegated this job to tell me what the text was. You get Malachi 2, 1 to 9, Jeff.

It's a cracker. That's what he said. So I'm thinking of all these Kiwi-isms that he uses. I'm going like, how do I translate that into Canadian? I wonder what that means. So let me read the text. Well, oh my goodness, there's dung in this passage.

I've never preached on dung before. And it's quite a stirring rebuke of the priest. So you have a layperson from the congregation come do the rebuke of the priest text.

[2 : 12] Okay, sounds like a setup. So here we are, a quite remarkable text, beautiful text and powerful text, and one that actually has an incredible message for us as individuals and as a congregation.

It's a wonderful text. So we're going to look at that. Let me set the stage for those of you who haven't been here or just to tune you in to where we are with Malachi. We're around 430 BC.

It's about 100 years after the return of the Israelites from exile. We are back in the land where they need to be. The temple has been rebuilt. It's not the grand and glorious one of the past.

It's not very impressive by their standards. And the spiritual and moral state of the community of faith is very, very low. And it's not going well for that community.

They're not honoring God the way that they should. They're not living the kinds of lives that are expected. There is spiritual and moral lethargy or worse. And the priests are centrally involved in this kind of spiritual and moral collapse.

[3 : 15] Last week, we were looking at the text that David opened up to us about the sacrificial system and the problems of the priests in that regard, rather than offering the pure, unblemished sacrifices that they are meant to, that actually what David called roadkill was being offered up.

And God's name was dishonored by the misconduct of the priests who were meant to be leading in proper worship according to God's instructions. That was last week.

So all is not well with the Israelites, with the people of God, and all is not well with their leadership. This story continues in our passage, and we look mostly at the responsibility that the priests have for teaching.

Now, most of you probably assume, when you talk about priests in the Old Testament, that it is this sacrificial worship that they are mostly responsible for. That's mostly what you think of them doing.

And of course, they are doing that. But it's only half of the story, and this passage is really about the other half of the story, which is their teaching function. It says back in Deuteronomy, when it describes the work of the priests, that they shall teach Jacob, a poetic name for the Israelite community, teach Jacob your rules.

[4 : 32] And Israel your law, and there's the word Torah in Hebrew, which is the big word for instruction from God, guidance for living life according to God's ways.

And it includes what we would think of as laws, but it's bigger than that. So the priests are meant to be the ones who teach instruction, God's instruction, God's revealed truth to the people, as well as leading the ordered worship according to God's stipulations in the temple.

So both of those go together, representing God to the people by being His voice and speaking His word, and representing the people to God by acting on their behalf in the worship system and sacrifices that had been made.

Both of those. Both of them go together. So in this passage, it's particularly that teaching ministry that has gone badly awry. And so we'll have a look at that.

So this text is a wonderful one. It has a very harsh rebuke at the beginning. At the end of the text, it gives us more reasons for why that harsh rebuke is coming. And in the middle is an amazingly powerful picture of the importance of the word of God for the community of God.

[5 : 42] And we're going to really delve into that middle bit. But let's see how this all goes. It's very interesting. So there's a very strong warning and even a very shocking rebuke to the priests.

The language that starts out, I want to pay attention to this, if you will not listen, says the Lord, and if you will not take it to heart to honor my name.

So what we saw last week was the Lord is saying, you are not honoring my name, O priest. This is desecration of my name rather than honoring of my name with the roadkill and all of that.

But listen, if you will not listen, and if you will not take it to heart to honor my name, then we're going to have a problem. Their failure of their duties and their actions flows from something within, and actually from within their hearts.

Notice that. Their hearts are not set upon the right thing, which is to honor and glorify God above all else. Their hearts are not in the right place. Their priorities are not right.

[6 : 46] So the action flows from the wrong priorities. And where do the wrong priorities flow from? They're not listening. It all starts with listening to the Word of God to set our priorities in honoring God at the center of our lives, that then the service of God is properly aligned.

That's true of the priests, and I want to say it's true of all of us as well. It's a deep biblical truth, that from hearing springs the cultivation of the right priority, which issues in right action.

That's true of all of us in all of our service or all of our ministry, whatever it may be. That's how important hearing and listening to the Word of God is. So they haven't been doing that.

They're not listening. They're not attuning their hearts rightly. And therefore, the way that they live their lives and the service they offer has gone amok. So what's the response of the Lord to this?

What's He going to do? He's not happy. And this is where our dung comes into the picture. Remarkable stuff. He says, Wow.

[7 : 56] One of the commentators I read on this said, No worse fate could possibly occur. In other words, that is the ultimate judgment of the priests and their responsibility.

What's going on here? When you do the sacrificial system, there's instructions, and this is in Leviticus chapter 4, if you want to look this up later, that you take the offal, the innards, the dung, and everything else out of the animal.

You put it outside the camp and you burn it. And the animal that is sacrificed goes forward to the altar. But all of that awful, icky kind of stuff is actually put outside the camp and burned.

It's unclean. It is not worthy of being in the Lord's presence. That's the way the system works. So what's going on in this passage is remarkable. The Lord says, All of that horrible, awful, yicky stuff that is unclean before me, I am going to smear all over your faces.

You could not have a worse rebuke than that. And furthermore, I'm going to take you and put you outside the camp in the garbage dump with the rest of that stuff. Wow.

[9 : 04] Wow. That's actually what's going on here. You couldn't have a worse possible fate. What's so wrong? What's gone wrong? Something must be really, really wrong if that is the kind of fate that they are at risk of.

Because that is a very severe kind of punishment. Well, what do we find? What you find in this text, look at verse 8, is they have corrupted the covenant of Levi. Levi. I'll say a little bit more about that in a second, this covenant with Levi.

They have turned from the way. Turned from the way. Turned from the way of the Lord. Turned from the path of righteousness that the Lord has given to them as priests.

And given through the priests to the people. They have turned from the way. In other words, their lives are a mess. They're not living out the teaching, the true teaching of God's Torah, His instruction.

Their lives have gone amok. And their teaching is a mess as well. They have caused many to stumble. And they have shown partiality in their teaching.

[10 : 09] At the very end of this passage, it says they've shown partiality in their teaching. Well, that might not sound so bad, but that's a very damning indictment. What that means is what they have done is twisted or distorted the word that they are meant to be conveying from the Lord.

They have twisted it and distorted it to fit the itching ears of their audience. They have compromised the message according to the standards of their audience and their culture and the times.

They've doctored up the message or watered down the message, but it's not the pure message. They've shown partiality really by telling people what they want to hear. That's the partiality problem.

God is not amused. That is not acceptable. So there's huge problems with their lives. They've fallen off the path. They're no longer following the way.

There's huge problems with their teaching. It's compromised. It's tickling people's ears. It's going the way of the world. The result is the community is a mess, spiritual and moral decline.

[11 : 13] They're not a community which is pleasing to the Lord. Big problems. Why is the Lord so upset about all this? What's the big deal here?

The big deal is that God himself is committed to his people. God is committed to this covenant with Levi. The covenant with Levi is really the choice of the Levites and their line, the Levitical priests, to represent God to the people and the people to God, to play this incredibly important role in the life of the congregation, in the life of the community of faith.

God is committed that that will succeed. So important is the role of the Levitical priests as teachers and as worship leaders for the forming of that community that the Lord will not allow it to go down the drain.

It is essential to the life of that community of faith that there is the leadership of right teaching and right worship because the purpose of God for his people is that they would be his true possession and they would live lives of holiness and righteousness before him and reflect his character into the world and that all the nations would see the glory of the Lord through the right order of this community and the way that they live their lives and give praise and glory to the Lord.

And God is committed to that himself. He's not going to let this go down the tubes. Therefore, he is passionately committed to putting this thing right. Therefore, when judgment must come, judgment must come because the life and health and vitality of the community is centrally tied up with its leadership performing its responsibilities rightly.

[12 : 55] So that's what the big deal is all about. So right in the middle of the passage, we're going to dig into this now, is the key. And it's the first glimmer, really, of hope that we have in this very gloomy book of Malachi with all of the stuff going so badly wrong.

It's wonderful stuff. It's very Reformation stuff. And it's very relevant to all of us. So let's look at what's going on in verses 5 to 7. This is the idealized picture of the teaching role of the leaders of the community.

It is an idealized picture. It's personified as Levi as an individual, but it really means this whole line of Levitical priests. It just individualizes it in a kind of poetic way.

It says him. But it's meaning this whole responsibility of the priesthood to both live the Word of God and to teach the Word of God rightly. That's what's going on here.

My covenant with him was one of life and peace, verse 5, and I gave them to him. A gift of God is life and peace which comes from him. Life is the way of God's blessing.

[14 : 05] Peace is this great word shalom, blessing in right relationship, in relationship with God and with one another. These are gifts of God that have been given to the Levites and through the Levites to the community as they lead that community.

I gave all of this, all of a gift, right? It was a covenant of fear. So the covenant of fear is not the sort of trembling, cowering fear. It's the reverent sort of awe before God that befits people in his presence.

So those who enter into peace and life are those who recognize who God is and revere him and stand in awe of him as he rightly so deserves.

Isn't that a beautiful picture? He stood in awe of my name. That's the starting point for right teaching and right ordering of the community, getting right with God in the sense of honoring him for who he is, which is the big problem we've seen in Malachi so far.

They don't honor God for who he is. So the passage goes on. Stood in awe of his name. Yes. Listen to this. Verse 6.

[15 : 16] True instruction was in his mouth, and no wrong was on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and he turned many from iniquity.

In that verse, you see melded together the content of the teaching and the character of the teacher, right? Both of them together.

True instruction was in his mouth. Torah is the word there, right? Same word again, true instruction. God's revealed truth was in the mouth of the teacher and the priest, conveying that truth unadorned, not doctored up, not watered down.

True instruction came to the community through the priest from God himself. It comes from God's mouth through the preacher's mouth to the people. That's this picture.

True instruction was his mouth, and then putting the same point negatively, no wrong was found on his lips. Same point is being made.

[16 : 18] No wrong was on his lips. That's the responsibility. The unadorned, pure word of God conveyed the revelation passed on faithfully to the people.

And so then it talks about he walked with me in peace and uprightness. He turned many from iniquity. Marvelous text. Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful. The preacher's life, in this case the priest, living out this message, walking with God.

An amazing text. He walked with me. Now, the metaphor of walking in biblical terms, especially in Old Testament terms, is the language of intimacy.

It's the language of communion. It's the language of you and your friend walking side by side down the road together. So it says of Noah.

Noah is said back in Genesis 6, Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God. So that's the calling of these priests.

[17 : 22] Just as Noah was an upright, righteous man walking in faithful communion with God, so they are. So at the same time as they're communicating the true content of true instruction, unadorned, undoctored, un-mired, they're also living that out day by day, embodying the truth as well as speaking the truth.

God at the very core of their lives. And between those two together, put together, what's the impact? They're turning many from iniquity, it says.

Turning people. True instruction is also saying this is not the way. This is the way. And that's calling people to repentance and to faith. It's inevitably part of conveying the truth of God is to say that there are other forms of life which are not pleasing to God.

The true and living God is to be worshipped. Idols are not. This is the way. Walk ye in it. So true instruction always points to sin. There I've said the word, haven't I?

The little three-letter word that even in church we sometimes don't want to use. The sin word. But notice here the impact of the truth of the message being proclaimed faithfully and a faithful life demonstrating that truth and embodiment is turning people from iniquity and returning to the Lord.

[18 : 43] And that's exactly what this community needs to do in all of its spiritual and moral lethargy. They need to return. And this is the passage that's showing us how that's going to happen.

From the lips of a priest, for the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, it says. And people should seek instruction from his mouth for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts.

Friends, that is an amazing text. That's a text to underline and meditate on for a long time. For the lips of the priest should guard knowledge. Preserve it, keep it, transmit it, care over it, watch over it.

Paul says to Timothy, his protege in New Testament times, guard the good deposit that is entrusted to you. Guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit. It's this guarding and protecting and transmitting of that word.

Guard that knowledge which is the true knowledge of God. That's the high and holy calling of these priests. What is the high and holy calling of God's people?

[19 : 47] It is to seek after instruction. Seek after the truth. Seek after it. I just have to ask about our own, your and my own hearts.

Are we seeking after the truth of God? Are we seeking after his word? Are we hungering after his instruction? That's the calling that comes to us.

People should seek instruction from his mouth. The mouth of God speaking to the mouth of the priest, the preacher, speaking that word to the community unadorned.

We should seek after that. Why? And this is a remarkable text. For he is a messenger of the Lord of hosts. It's the only time in the Old Testament a priest is ever called a messenger of God.

Right? So it's again, being in the, the idea of the messenger as with angels is, you're in the presence of God. And you speak what you hear from the very presence of God and transmit that to the people.

[20 : 48] That's the idea of being a messenger. From the presence of God into the presence of the people. Not their own message. Not sharing some religious reflections or edifying ideas.

No, speaking what the Lord says. Faithfully transmitting that. Doctrine and life melded together in the life of the preacher.

So that what? People would be turned from sin to true and living faith that we seek after in God's truth. There we go. I think of the example.

I wish there were some stained glass windows in this church because this illustration goes even better with it. But this melding together of doctrine and life is a phrase that George Herbert uses.

Great Anglican poet of the 17th century. Are there any George Herbert fans out there? Oh, a few hands. That's good. This is your homework. I'm a professor after all. So I can give homework at any time.

[21 : 51] And here it is. So go read George Herbert's poem called The Windows. You can find it online, I'm sure. George Herbert, wonderful Anglican priest and magnificent poet, has a poem called The Windows.

And it uses the analogy of stained glass windows to talk about the life and ministry of the preacher. And his idea is that doctrine and life are like the process coming together and being fused together, like the process of making beautiful colored stained glass.

where you take the color and you meld it in with the glass and it becomes literally melted into one inseparably. Right? That's the way glass is made. That's what he's thinking of.

And for him, it's doctrine and life, he calls it. It's content of the message, the doctrine that is preached. It's the character and life of the preacher. The two of them melded together harmoniously in God's word, he says, so that when light shines through the window, what the people see is the example of doctrine and life.

The truth of God lived. It's a beautiful, beautiful image. It's very challenging for any of us who stand up here and do these kinds of things. It's a beautiful image. It's doctrine and life melded.

[23 : 02] And that's the picture you have of the true instruction that is to come to the people. So teachers are to order their lives according to, faithfully, the word that they are teaching.

Right? Teachers are to speak that truth of God that comes from God himself by first being listeners to that word and then themselves being the faithful teachers of that word.

True instruction transmitted. But that text and that challenge is not just for the likes of those that are wearing dog collars or those that are lay preachers that pop up from the congregation from time to time.

With the help of Luther, I'll remind you there is in Protestant territory what's called the priesthood of all believers. God's purpose way back in Exodus 19, he says, is to make his people a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

And the great insight from the Reformation is that that means that all of God's people are priests and that we have the high and holy privilege of speaking and teaching God's word to one another.

[24 : 09] So this isn't just a text about the true transmission of God's word and living it out for the likes of, say, Dan or me or someone like that. It's everyone who is actually in the business of learning, teaching, and transmitting God's word to one another, even at a place like St. John's.

So what about Bible study leaders, small group leaders, children's ministers, youth leaders, speakers at learner's exchange, catechists, anyone involved in Sunday school, parents teaching the Bible to their kids.

It's a word for all of us. The priesthood of all believers is the priesthood of being those who hear and receive God's word and speak that word to other people.

The great martyr from the Nazi era, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, another good Lutheran, says the highest calling of the Christian is to speak the word of God to someone else.

So this is the priesthood of all of us. So don't think that a passage like this points the finger particularly at Dan or David or someone else who's up here regularly. It actually is inviting all of us into the same hearing and receiving of God's word and being shaped by it so deeply that we reflect it in our life.

[25 : 23] And we teach it and teach it and teach it and point people to that way. The other implication I want to talk about for just a minute is the implication for us as a congregation.

God's people are exhorted in this text to seek after God's word, to seek after true instruction. So I just want to ask, how is that true of you or of me?

At an individual level. Jesus says, man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God. So the idea is just as bread is necessary for everyday life, and we pray in the Lord's Prayer, give us this day our daily bread, the essential thing of life, our bread.

What Jesus is of course saying is that just as essential for our inner life, our spiritual life, our thought, is the word of God itself.

Do we hunger after every word that comes from the mouth of God? Are we seeking after that word? Are we seeking after true instruction? Are we seekers at an individual level?

[26 : 32] And are we seekers as a congregation? Are our hearts really turned to seeking after true instruction and the word of the Lord so that we might rightly live it and represent him well in the world, which is his purpose for us?

Is that what we're really after? It's very easy to get caught up in all the busyness of our everyday lives. Don't we all know it? Dan said I was president of Regent College in my spare time.

It's a busy time. I hadn't noticed any spare time. But is it true of you in your busyness that you're a seeker? Is it true of us in our congregational busyness that we are seekers after God's word?

That that is first and foremost. So back to this initial invitation that I talked about earlier, to be a hearer of that word so that we would be so transformed by it and our hearts set right on the right priorities that our service of God would be pleasing to him?

That's a word for all of us in this congregation. And it hinges upon being a hearer. The great commandment of the Lord in the Old Testament is what? Hear, O Israel.

[27 : 38] It's shema in Hebrew. Hear. Be a listener. The first thing God does in the Old Testament is speak the world into existence. He is a God who speaks.

Dr. Packer has a wonderful little book called God Has Spoken. So we, as this community of faith right here, along with our brothers and sisters of faith throughout the world, are those who have been spoken to.

We have been addressed. The good news is that God has spoken. He has revealed himself to us in his word. That word incarnate in Jesus, the word written in the scriptures. Are we seeking after that word that we might live in light of its truth?

That's the challenge for us individually. That's the challenge for us as a congregation. As I've been thinking through this passage, I've been thinking of one of Cranmer's wonderful prayers from the prayer book, the Collect for the Second Sunday in Advent.

All of you lifelong Anglicans will know it. Let me read us in that prayer, and then we'll continue in prayer. Let us pray. Blessed Lord, who has caused all holy scriptures to be written for our learning, grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Savior, Jesus Christ.

[29 : 12] Amen. Amen.