

What use is it to serve God? (Evening Service)

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[0 : 0 0] We've been privileged this evening to witness and participate in the ordination of Jeremy Graham to the priesthood. Jeremy is one of my former students at Regent College, and I got to know him well during those years.

I remember one semester he showed up in all three classes I was teaching, Hindmarsh all day, every day. So we got to know one another well, and I learned to wait for the question, the thoughtful, practical, slightly unsettling, real-life question that would never come from Jeremy in every class at some point.

He asked really good questions, and he always pushed me, wanting to know exactly what I thought about this or that would never let me off the hook. It was obvious always that Jeremy was thinking and that his studies were never merely an academic exercise.

I actually went and reviewed my notes on his comprehensive exam this afternoon just to see if there's any remedial work we needed to do. But I think it's all clear. Straight A's.

That was five years ago, Jeremy, and it's been a delight for Carolyn and I to watch you and Kimberly and your family and to rejoice in God's work in your lives. You have no idea the joy it is for a teacher to see one's students go on to live lives of fruitful, fruitful lives of love and service in Christ's name as you have done.

[1 : 2 2] At Regent College, I have long felt that God gives us better students than we deserve, that for two or three years we strive to do as little damage as possible, and then we take credit for everything you do afterward for the rest of your life.

Laughter As we think of Jeremy's ordination this evening, let's turn to the scriptures that were read for us. Let's turn for a few moments to the biblical text in Malachi that was read.

Malachi 3, chapter 3, verse 13 to the end of the book on page 802 in your Pew Bibles. On this day of new beginnings, all the hopes that attend your ordination, Jeremy, this text asks what may seem a negative, yet what is a very relevant question?

What use is it to serve the Lord? The answer that comes from Malachi addresses Jeremy's situation today, but it addresses each of us as well.

We are all called to serve the Lord. So as I speak to Jeremy, hear the words coming over his shoulder and landing on you as well. In chapter 3, verse 13, we pick up the sort of dialogue God and his people have been having in the book of Malachi that characterized this book as the Lord says to his people, says, you have said harsh things against me.

[2 : 4 4] And as the people ask, what do you mean? It seems in God's answer that it may be particularly or especially the Levites, the priests who have been ground down, feeling that their service in the Lord's work has been futile.

Jeremy, these are tired priests who wonder what the point of it all is anymore, since the arrogant are blessed and the evil prosper.

Given the shortage of tithes and offerings mentioned earlier in chapter 3, maybe these Levitical priests are also feeling that when they look at their paycheck, they have literally nothing to show for their covenant faithfulness.

So what do you do, Jeremy, on those days when you feel like turning in your dog collar? What do we do when we grow weary in serving the Lord?

What the Lord does here in the prophecy of Malachi and his great mercy is to offer a much larger perspective on what he is doing. This kind of blows open the landscape. What he is doing, what he will do, it's a perspective that will sustain you, Jeremy, and sustain all of us as we seek to serve the Lord, even when times get discouraging.

[3 : 57] In chapter 4, verse 1, and again in verse 5, the prophet speaks of a day that is coming, a day that is coming. He stretches the horizon for ministry from the present with its immediate troubles and injustices and concerns to the future, so that our horizon for ministry includes the great day of the Lord when he will decisively deal with evil and at the same time save his people.

That's the answer to the question. What use is it to serve the Lord? Look wider and you'll see. Jeremy, as we look at the scripture text together this evening, on the day of your ordination, I give you a three-fold charge from this text.

First of all, in your ministry, fear the Lord's name. Fear the Lord's name. In chapter 3, verse 16, we read how those who feared the Lord and honored his name responded to the Lord's word.

They talked with each other and found that the Lord was attentive, listening, even took notes, as it were, recording their names in a book of remembrance.

One of the greatest things we can be afraid of when we feel like serving the Lord is futile is that the Lord doesn't notice and the Lord doesn't care. But those who fear his name can know that he is deeply attentive, even more that he treasures, that he cherishes them as a man spares his son who serves him.

[5 : 24] So, Jeremy, when the going gets rough, fear the Lord's name. Honor him. Never let holy things become too familiar. Luther once said that if you fear anything more than God, then it is that thing that you will serve.

Have a hushed reverence in the presence of God like the moment you held each of your newborn children. With Jacob, may you awake continually saying, surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it.

How awesome is this place. This is none other than the house of God and the gate of heaven. Let your ministry begin every day. Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Stand every day amazed in the presence of Jesus the Nazarene. And as you stand in awe day by day, worshiping the living God, he will not fail to attend you, to listen to you, to remember you, to spare you, and to treasure you.

As we see in this text. Second, Jeremy, not only are you to fear the Lord's name, but also you are to remember the Lord's word. Remember the Lord's word. You are this day ordained a minister of the gospel in word and sacrament.

[6 : 35] The word preached and the word made visible. And the exhortation and the prophecy of Malachi in light of the great day of the Lord, chapter 4, verse 4, is this. Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel.

What use is it to serve the Lord? Moses is here described specifically as a servant, the Lord's servant. The key to serving the Lord without futility is to remember his word.

If we fear the Lord, we will be on tiptoes to listen to and to honor every word that comes from him. If this was true of the old covenant and the revelation at Horeb or Sinai, how much more so with the new covenant inaugurated by Jesus Christ?

The book of Hebrews draws the contrast, saying you have not come to Mount Sinai, to that mountain that made Moses tremble, but you have come to Mount Zion, the city of the living God, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant.

And so, see that you do not refuse him who is speaking. So, Jeremy, fear the Lord and remember his word. Study the scriptures, meditate on them, and cherish them as the very words of the living God day by day.

[7 : 45] Trust these words. Offer up these words in preaching and in sacrament and in pastoral care to all those you are called to serve. There are many days you will feel inadequate to serve your people, but the word of God is always more than adequate.

Be devoted to God's word and trust that God's word is enough, that it always brings life wherever it is proclaimed. Our friend Daryl Johnson once told me that he can rarely sleep the night before he preaches since he is just so excited about what he gets to share with the people the next day.

That's the spirit. What will sustain you when you are weary and wonder if serving the Lord is futile? Fear the Lord's name. Remember the Lord's word.

And thirdly and finally, behold the Lord's day. Behold the Lord's day. More than ever, we need a prophetic perspective on ministry. We need to see the present in light of the future.

There is something that the text says we are to behold, we are to see, we are to contemplate, as we go about serving the Lord day by day. We need to see clearly that a day is coming when God will extinguish evil once and for all.

[8 : 55] He will deal with the evil of this world, a root and branch, with a terrifying and devastating completeness. It's for him to do, and he will do it. The picture is of fire again, but not now the refining fire of chapter three, but a scorched earth inferno that consumes everything.

It is for God to deal with evil, and he will decisively. Yet in the midst of this terrifying judgment, there is mercy and salvation.

The image is that those who fear the Lord are sheltered under his wings. Psalm 57, under the shadow of thy wings will be my refuge until this tyranny be overpassed. As evil is extinguished, a new day dawns, and the picture is of a sunrise where the horizon line is briefly tinged rose, and it looks as if the sun has wings.

And under these wings there is healing. What a beautiful image. As Charles Wesley wrote, hail the heavenly prince of peace, hail the sun of righteousness, light and life to all he brings, risen with healing in his wings.

The imagery in Malachi then shifts to new life, as newborn calves come leaping from their stalls, and find wickedness has been reduced to ashes under their feet.

[10 : 20] New life and exuberance instead of weary service. God's judgment and mercy always come together. God's judgment acts to shut down one state of affairs, and to open up a new set of possibilities.

As a minister of the gospel, Jeremy, you must contemplate these things. Behold the day, as Malachi says. See the coming of the Lord, and minister in light of this.

Bring as many people as you can under the healing wings of the sun of righteousness. As Jesus said, I have other sheep, not of this sheepfold. I must bring them in also.

Minister in light of this day. If you will fear the Lord's name, remember the Lord's word, and behold the Lord's day, Jeremy, you will have a John the Baptist ministry.

You will be preparing the way of the Lord, and pointing men and women, boys and girls, to Jesus. At the end of chapter 4, Malachi points forward to the new Elijah, who will prepare for the coming of the Lord, John the Baptist.

[11 : 25] As Moses and Elijah are mentioned here in Malachi, so they appear with Christ on the Mount of Transfiguration. Ministering in light of the day of the Lord means ministering in light of the first and final advent of Jesus Christ.

It is to have a Christ-centered ministry first and last. Not only a John the Baptist ministry, if you will follow these instructions, Jeremy, you'll be having a Father's Day sort of ministry.

As people's lives are touched intimately by the saving work of God, who transforms and reconciles whole families by the gospel, in the place of our deepest hopes and fears, turning the hearts of fathers to their children, and the hearts of children to their fathers.

This is how Malachi concludes. As Protestants, we don't as often perhaps use the language for our priests of Father and God. But, Jeremy, this text gives a closing picture of serving the Lord that is both prophetic, proclaiming God's word, and pastoral, ministering God's words to family.

As it says in Ephesians 3, I kneel before the Father, Peter, before whom all fatherhood, or from whom all fatherhood, Patria, derives.

[12 : 33] God is the source of healthy families. God's word touches our lives intimately. So, Jeremy, be a priest first to Kimberly, to Lucy, Toby, and Naomi, and then to all those to whom you minister.

Maybe every minister should understand themselves first and foremost as a minister of children and families. never forget that you were ordained on Father's Day. May your life and ministry, Jeremy, be blessed from this day forward as you fear the Lord's name, remember his word, and behold his day.

Amen.