

The Only Hope for Fallible Priests

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[0 : 00] Lord Jesus, you said without you we can do nothing. Yet Paul says, I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

I pray, Lord, that as we share the word of God together, that you will grant the anointing of your Holy Spirit. And I pray that my speaking might be your speaking by grace.

I pray in Christ's name. Amen. Well, last time Aaron gave me a passage to preach, it was a peach of a passage.

Today's passage isn't quite so peachy. In fact, it's downright awful, if you know what I mean.

The title of my message from this very tough passage, which is on the declension of the priesthood in the time of the post-exile period, I've called it the only hope for fallible priests.

[1 : 04] The only hope for fallible priests. The only hope for fallible priests with more than egg on their faces.

I want to actually speak about the priests in Malachi's time. And then I want to talk about our priesthood as the people of God. And then thirdly, I want to speak about the one in whom we find hope as fallible priests.

And that is the one great high priest, Jesus Christ our Lord. So first of all, let's begin by speaking of the priests of Malachi's day to make sure we understand the original context here and the meaning for the original audience.

Malachi begins, And now this admonition is for you, O priests. Let me just remind you, the word Malachi means messenger. Malachi is a messenger of God.

Malachi seems to be in a contemporary of Nehemiah. So exiles have returned from Persia to Jerusalem. And under Nehemiah and Ezra, they finish building the temple.

[2 : 11] And under Nehemiah in particular, they have been exhorted to do four things. To stay faithful to God in four ways. Help the poor. Avoid mixed marriages.

Keep the Sabbath. And bring their tithes and offerings faithfully. They've rebuilt the walls. And they're in a fairly good place. But unfortunately, Nehemiah has to go back to Persia for a season.

And by the time he gets back from Persia, the spiritual state of the people is at a very low ebb. There's been a massive declension. The priesthood had especially become complacent and even corrupted.

I don't know why. It's probably because, or perhaps because, they were part of a small temple. And the temple was very, very small in comparison with the great Solomonic temple.

And they may have despised the day of small things. Their building wasn't what they expected it to be. All those kinds of things. I'm not sure. But the priests had become complacent and corrupted.

- [3 : 14] And it's Malachi who ministers into that situation at exactly that time. And he has a message exposing the unfaithfulness of the post-exilic people of God in general.
- But what I love about Malachi is he doesn't just expose. He doesn't just condemn. He also pronounces hope. And in this passage, which actually spotlights the ministry of the priests, I want to reflect Malachi and offer hope.
- Because as we compare ourselves with these priests, we'll find we're actually not that different. And that we desperately need a great high priest to help us in our priestly ministry as the people of God.
- Let me do a quick recap of chapter 1 so that we get the context here for chapter 2. Chapter 1, Malachi wastes no time going to the heart of the problem of the people of God who have drifted away from him, become cold in heart, like often we are as the people of God.
- And the heart of the problem is that they doubted the love of God. I have loved you, says the Lord, but you ask, how have you loved us? Malachi's is a series of questions. The people actually had a God, but they had a God who was in fact a projection of their own psyches.
- [4 : 26] Not the real God, not the revealed God of their own history. Not the lover of their nation, not the lover of their souls. God was a projection of their own psyche.
- And I want to say that when our hearts are unconvinced of the love of the real God, we too begin to have a God who is a projection of our own psyche. Receiving the love of God, believing the love of God, the God who is now in our time revealed himself as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.
- We need a fresh awareness, always in the Christian life, of how much we are loved by that God.
- And it's out of that love that we then can minister as priests. But notice that there's a key phrase in this passage that relates to what the priests were doing.
- It says their hearts were not set. You might have a different translation. But twice over in this passage, as a result of their failure to receive the love of God, their hearts were not set.
- [5 : 30] That is, they weren't formed. And they were in desperate need of a reforming of their hearts in accordance with the love of God. That's the very key phrase of our text.
- So what marks the priests as the spiritual leader of that apathetic community was that their hearts were not set towards God and towards his ministry because they were not receiving the love of God.
- It's as we receive the love of God that then we can minister the love of God to others and go about his ministry in a way that's characterized by grace and love. They didn't believe the love of God. And so they weren't receiving it.
- And I want to say, folks, right in the heart of this text in Malachi, we have the very core of the gospel and its transforming power. God transforms us not by his judgment.
- He transforms us by his love. It's his love that woos us to himself. It's the goodness of God that leads us to repentance. And it's as our hearts are set by receiving the love of God that we are then empowered to love God and to love our neighbor and to love God's good creation.
- [6 : 33] I'm kind of reminded here of John Bowlby's work in Attachment Theory who said that when kids don't attach to parents, it's going to be very hard for them to attach in later life.
- So in other words, the formation of being attached as a child is so crucial to how our relationships become in later life. Malachi is really saying in a spiritual sense, your spiritual formation as a child is receiving the love of God.

And as that love of God pervades your soul, and as it continues to pervade your soul throughout your Christian life, and as you have fresh experiences of that love, such as what Paul prays for in Ephesians chapter 3, he prays to a group of people who already know Christ, who already know the love of God.

He prays that the length and breadth and depth and height of the love of Christ might come afresh into their hearts. And I think we are always, every day, in need of that fresh outpouring of the love of God.

But these are priests who are not living in that love, and therefore their hearts are not set towards God and towards His ministry. So four things about these priests, and four things about us as priests, and four things about Jesus as our great high priest.

[7 : 42] First of all, these priests in Malachi's time. Number one, their hearts are not set towards blessing Yahweh. They're in a state of declension.

And now you priests, this is warning for you, verse one, if you do not listen, and if you do not resolve or set your heart to honor my name, says the Lord Almighty, I will send a curse on you, and I will curse your blessings.

Yes, I've already cursed them, because you have not set your heart to honor me. That's problem number one. It's a problem of the heart. Second problem. This got manifested in half-hearted sacrifices that result in their being shame-faced, just to put that very diplomatically.

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. This is Yahweh speaking, folks. And He wants to slap dung over the faces of the priests.

Fascinating verse. First, context here, the entrails of an animal were offered in sacrifice. Sorry, the entrails of an animal that had been offered in sacrifice, the entrails were usually taken outside the camp, and they were burned along with the skin.

[9 : 01] Yahweh says, because you were going through the religious motions, because you were offering lame and damaged animals, because you were offering half-hearted sacrifices, and your hearts are far from me, the very sacrifices you were supposedly offering to God will be used to shame you.

Awful, which is another word for intestines, awful will be all over your face, and there's nothing worse than awful, awful. Now, the theme of sacrifices being offered to God, and God not being happy with them, is actually a fairly common theme in the prophets.

You'll find this in Isaiah chapter 1, for example. The multitude of your sacrifices, He says, What are they to me? Says the Lord, I have more than enough of your burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fattened animals.

I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my course? And I can just translate that, perhaps, to our own services as we come together.

And when we do so half-heartedly, when we're in a state of declension, He says, Stop bringing your meaningless offerings. Your incense is detestable to me. And what was the solution?

[10 : 14] Wash. Make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight. Stop doing wrong. Learn to do right. And here's the key. Seek justice. Your sacrifices are valueless, unless you're seeking justice.

Take up the cause of the fatherless. Plead the case of the widow. And then my sacrifices, the sacrifices that I actually designed, will then bring me some pleasure. So with a very low view of the love of God, these people blamed God for their situation.

But rather than being in open idolatry, they chose the path of quiet compromise. Bit by bit, they compromised. Priests without passion. Might that describe you and your heart tonight?

Merely engaged in the externals. Orthodox, to be sure. But orthodox without fire. They did their duty, but no more.

Passive aggressives. God's priests were no longer those with an undivided heart, serving with passion. Third, broken covenants.

[11 : 30] Verse 4 says, I've asked myself, what covenant is being referred to here?

And what person is this that Malachi has in mind? Who is this lovely priest, who is all that a priest should be, and all that they were not. And Malachi, we use the general term Levi, but I think Levi is code word for the priesthood.

And there may be a specific person he has in mind, but what covenant is being referred to here? The way in which priests and the whole tribe of Levi and those of the family of Aaron came to be priests involved the decision that God took way back at the Exodus when he said, I have taken the Levites from among the Israelites in place of the first male offspring of every Israelite woman.

The Levites are mine, for all the firstborn are mine. When I struck down all the firstborn in Egypt, I set apart for myself every firstborn in Israel. Whether human or animal, they are to be mine. And I am the Lord.

So way back at the Exodus, the people of Egypt had lost their firstborn. And God sets apart the firstborn of Israel, but instead of actually doing that literally, he sets apart a tribe.

[12 : 56] And that tribe is the tribe of Levi, which is where the priests come from. And it seems to me that there's a covenant involved in that, and that may be what Malachi is saying.

And he's saying, Look, I established your priesthood on the basis of a faithful covenant. Now you're in danger of losing it. The apathy of your present behavior threatens to bring the priesthood to an end.

And God's rebuke was so as to prevent this. God doesn't want this to happen. He's pleading with them to repent and to change and to be renewed and revived, to be the priesthood that they're meant to be. And so he says, I don't want this covenant to end.

Now there is another example in the Old Testament of a covenant involving a priest. The people of God were in a bad state back in Numbers chapter 25.

And we read there that an Israelite man brought into the camp a Midianite woman right before the eyes of Moses and the whole assembly of Israel while they were weeping at the entrance of the tent of meeting.

[13 : 59] So this was a flagrant disobedience of God's call to the people of Israel to marry only Israelites. Because at that time they were the people of God on earth and they were called to purity in that sense.

When that kind of thing doesn't apply today, obviously, in an ethnic or racial sense. But someone had had enough of this declension and the poor state of the people of God.

So it says, When Phineas, son of Eliezer, the son of Aaron, the priest, saw this, he left the assembly, took a spear in his hand and followed the Israelite into the tent. He drove the spear into both of them right through the Israelite man and into the woman's stomach.

Then the plague against the Israelites was stopped. And this is what the Lord says to Moses. Phineas, son of Eliezer, the son of Aaron, the priest, has turned my anger away from the Israelites.

And now the language is very reminiscent of Malachi chapter 2 because this is what God says to Moses. Since he was as zealous for my honor, in other words, set his heart towards my honor among them as I am and I did not put an end to them in my zeal.

[15 : 10] Therefore tell him, I am making my covenant of peace with him. So God makes a covenant of peace with Phineas and although the ironic order of the priesthood comes from Phineas, 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.

This has all the background of Malachi chapter 2. There's a fourth problem, however, that characterized these priests.

Their teaching lacked credibility. So their hearts are not set towards God and their sacrifices are half-hearted. They're in danger of violating the priesthood covenant.

And fourthly, their teaching lacks credibility. Not surprising, really. Their teaching lacks credibility by comparison with this Phineas or Levi or someone who had been a great hero in the past for Malachi and for God.

And these priests, and by the way, priests were responsible for teaching the law. Their compromised hearts had led to compromised worship, to compromised lifestyles, and now to compromised teaching.

[16 : 29] The function of a teacher is to do two things. is to present the objective truth of who God is and what he desires. Things like justice.

Things like proper moral judgments. These priests were showing partiality. But the teaching priest must also be truthful in a subjective sense.

That is, they must have inner truth. They must have integrity. Not perfection, just integrity. They cannot be trafficking in unfelt truth. They cannot be advocating a lifestyle they don't live.

So when teachers teach the truth and when they teach it in truth, people will be hungry to hear. Verse 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.

So the priest's failures in these areas are the reason that God speaks through Malachi and says, 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 law.

[17 : 33] So they had awful, awful on their faces. Let me run now quickly to us and say, how does this apply to us? This is a group of priests way back then, thousands of years ago.

What's that got to do with the church today? I'm so glad you asked. How can we as the church not have egg on our faces? Or worse?

I want to address us as the people of God and remind us that all of us are priests. Every one of us. I could, I suppose, address the leadership.

I could address those who are called priests in a sense that they're pastors and leaders of our congregation. But I chose not to go that route because one of the things the New Testament clearly teaches is that every child of God is a priest.

You're a priest in a two-fold sense. You're a holy priest. That means you have the capacity to come into God's presence through the person of Jesus and encounter God and you're a royal priest.

[18 : 32] You have the privilege of taking the presence of God then and mediating it to the world. In other words, we could characterize that you're a priest in two senses. Worship and witness.

And of course, part of your outside priesthood, we are priests in the church and we are priests towards the world. Part of that involves our priesthood of the gospel and which involves also our priesthood of all creation.

So we're all called to be priests. And the truth is, and I'm including myself absolutely, I have four fingers pointing back, we all fail miserably.

as priests. Let me go over the four things. Their hearts were not set toward Yahweh. I believe that all of us struggle with really believing that God loves us.

How have you loved us, we say. We don't often live in the full experience of the love of God. And as a result of that, we easily turn to broken cisterns that can't hold water. We're hot and we're cold.

[19 : 36] Often we're very poorly formed as a result of maximum exposure to media and all the busyness of life and minimal exposure to the word of God.

Corporately, as the church, I think we're also prone to idols. The idols of consumerism. The idols of individualism. As individuals, we are also prone to selfishness, to pleasure seeking, to stress relief.

Some of us are very prone to approval seeking and all of those things keep us from being the priest that God has called us to be. Some of us, honestly, come to church hoping that the one priest out there is going to do all the priesting for us.

Where in fact, God invites us all as the people of God, every one of us, to participate in worship and to give our offerings to God in worship. And perhaps, as you hear this, you feel as though you need to come back to God in a sense.

Have a fresh experience of the love of God. He loves you deeply and He wants you to minister out of His love and be a priest in that way. David says, after a hard time in his life, he says, Don't cast me from your presence, Lord.

[20 : 49] Don't take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant a willing spirit to sustain me. I think all of us know the reality that our hearts are somewhat undivided.

We wished our hearts were more pure towards God. We are in desperate need as priests. Secondly, our sacrifices are often also half-hearted sacrifices resulting in shame.

You say, What sacrifices am I meant to offer today as a priest? Didn't Jesus make the one sacrifice forever on the cross? By one offering He has perfected forever those who are being made holy? Didn't Jesus do that?

So what do I have to offer? Actually, the New Testament is full of sacrifices that we're meant to offer. In response to what Christ has done, in response to being loved by God in Christ, we first of all offer our whole selves back to God.

I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. Our bodies represent our whole being. And God's saying, I want you to come with your whole being when you come to worship.

[21 : 51] And I want every aspect of your life to be a result of pouring out your body and every aspect of your being to me. And I want to encourage you, if you might be in a state of somewhat low spirituality and feel distant from God, I encourage you to come back tonight and say, Lord Jesus, I offer my body to you afresh.

My whole body, soul, and spirit is yours. Take me, use me. Then our praise. In Hebrews chapter 13, the writer to the Hebrews says, through Jesus, therefore let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise, the fruit of lips that openly profess His name.

And then our possessions are part of our sacrifice. Do not forget to do good and to share with others for with such sacrifices God is pleased. You know, God is not a God of dualism. God is interested in our money.

God's interested in our possessions and our possessions are an offering to Him. Our witness is an offering to Him. In Romans chapter 15, verse 16, Paul talks about his whole missionary enterprise as being an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

What an amazing opportunity we have to be involved as missional people of God. Your whole way of life is an offering to God. Follow God's example, Paul says in Ephesians chapter 5, therefore as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love just as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

[23 : 15] Thirdly, we often don't live into our professions as the covenant people of God. And fourthly, our teaching therefore can lack credibility.

When we're not on fire for God, when we're not characterized by His love, our teaching loses its edge. And all of us, folks, are responsible for teaching, not just our great priests who minister to us here in our church who are great teachers, but we've been all called to teach.

The Great Commission encourages us all to teach them to obey all things that I've commanded you. How's your teaching going? Royal priests who are commissioned to declare His glory everywhere we go.

1 Peter chapter 2. All right. I've been pretty discouraging so far. We don't do very well, do we, when it comes to priesthood?

I get very frustrated when I come to worship. Why? Why? My concentration is all over the map. I'm easily distracted.

[24 : 23] Can you imagine you had an audience with the King of Kings? Would you be distracted? Yet we come Sunday by Sunday to encounter the living God. How can I be distracted? Our lovely worship team is leading us into the presence of God and I'm kind of, my heart's sort of there, not quite there.

You know, we're all over the map. Our concentration is pathetic. Our offerings of our lives at best are half-hearted. Our teaching often lacks credibility as the people of God.

Well, I'm not going to leave you there on a down note because I can't wait to talk about our great high priest. He's the only one who can help dysfunctional, imperfect, broken priests.

The only hope for fallible priests I know is the one priest. And here's the great news. Think about Jesus for just a moment who comes into this world and He's got a heart that's set towards Yahweh.

Actually, He is Yahweh. He's the Son and His heart is set towards the Father. Even in the eternal existence, His eternal existence in the Trinity, in eternity past, He's basking in the love of the Father and returning that love to the Father by the Spirit.

[25 : 42] No wonder He's the perfect priest. And when He comes into this earth, He's got a heart set so much towards the Father that He says things, even before He comes into the world, He says, Here I am.

I have come to do your will, Father. And when He's here on earth, He says, I always do what pleases the Father. I do not seek to please myself but Him who sent me. So this lovely person, Jesus, whose heart is set by the love of the Father.

You know, as a man, His heart was set by the love of the Father at His baptism because the Father spoke from Him and said, You are what? My beloved Son in whom is all my delight. And as you and I hear that afresh as people in Christ, this is part of our becoming better priests, becoming priests in Christ and knowing that the grace of being priests in that one great priest.

I think of Jesus who, as He's going to the cross, to use the words of Isaiah, said these words, I gave my back to the smiters and my cheek to them that plucked off the hair. I hid not my face from shame and spitting.

And He went all the way to the cross until He said the words, It is finished. Here is a heart that's set towards God. And now He lives in the power of an endless life.

[27 : 02] And what's He doing? He's praying for us. And guess what? He's not praying for us from a distance. We're actually in Christ by the Spirit. And some of these things begin to rub off on us, but the beauty is that our priestly ministry is really His priestly ministry.

And it is a priestly ministry because we get to participate in His priestly ministry. Is there any kind of half-hearted sacrifice in the ministry of Jesus as our great high priest?

He set His face like a flint to go to the cross. In fact, the disciples, as they watched Him going to the cross to make a sacrifice on the cross to His Father, they were amazed.

They couldn't believe His face was set like a flint, His determination to go to the cross. And He goes to the cross, and what does He do on the cross? He gives Himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Beautiful. Gives His all. Nothing half-hearted about that. All on the altar. How much more shall the blood of Christ do through the eternal Spirit? Offered Himself without spot to God.

[28 : 02] Purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God. He took all of the awful stuff for us. And as a result of what He did, what did the Father do?

He glorified Him. The Father said to Him just before the cross, Jesus is concerned that as He goes to the cross, that He would glorify the Father. The Father responds, I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.

And Paul tells us that as a result of going to the cross and giving Himself wholeheartedly, there wasn't shame on the face of Christ anymore. There was glory. God has highly exalted Him and given Him a name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

He sat down at the right hand of God. Let me talk about covenants and Jesus. Was there any broken covenant in the high priestly ministry of Jesus? In fact, two things. Jesus is, just for the sake of time, I'll touch these and just move on.

Jesus is the covenanting partner of the Father who covenanted and we covenanted in Him. and so He's the covenanting partner. God looked for a covenanting partner and found one, finally, in Jesus Christ and we are represented in Him.

[29 : 18] He is the mediator of the new covenant and that new covenant, because we are in Christ, our sins are forgiven. Your sins and iniquities are remembered no more. I will be your God and you'll be my people.

This is belonging. God is our possession and He possesses us and is also transforming power. The law is no longer outside us, condemning us, but inside us and by the indwelling Spirit, transforming us.

Jesus' sacrifice is expressed in its fullness in the fullness of the covenant in Hebrews chapter 10 by one offering as perfected forever those who are being made holy.

And what about the teaching of Jesus? Fourth category. You've read this lots of times. The feedback that was given on, you know, I'm a professor at Regents and I get feedback at the end of every course whether I like it or not.

And it's usually very instructive. I should say that. Listen to the feedback on the teaching of Jesus. He spoke with authority, not like the scribes and Pharisees.

[30 : 25] Never man spake like this man. And Peter says in John chapter 6, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. They marveled at the gracious words that proceeded out of his mouth.

People were lining up in crowds to hear him teach. All right, conclusion. I just plead with you tonight, first of all, to come with brokenness to the presence of God and acknowledge we're imperfect priests.

But come secondly, and this is the gospel. Your priesthood is perfect in Christ. He enables you to pray. You're on mission with him.

You're not doing mission for him. And the burden of my message is to draw you into a fresh realization of how pervasive God's grace is.

You know, we're really comfortable saying that our salvation is provided by the sacrifice of our great high priest who sat down when he had finished his work. What we miss is this, that even our response to the gospel is enabled by grace.

[31 : 42] Romans 8 says, we don't know how to pray. You'd think we know how to pray, wouldn't you? We don't know what to pray. So how can we pray? We can only pray because the Holy Spirit is at work within us, interceding for us, and then our prayers are transferred to the Lord Jesus Christ, our great high priest, and he brings them to the Father.

And if it wasn't for that high priestly and trinitarian ministry, our prayers would count for nothing. We are caught up in him. And our worship, that we come with imperfection every Sunday, I'm so glad that I have a great high priest.

And I love this old hymn that I used to sing when I was a young guy in church. To all our prayers and praises, he adds his sweet perfume. And love the censor raises their odors to consume.

I started my talk by praying, without you, we can do nothing. With him, we can do everything. Let me encourage you to be a priest whose heart is set towards God.

Let me encourage you to be a priest who makes full sacrifice of our all being and our praise and our worship and every aspect of our being. Let us be priests who live in accordance with the new covenant, which by the way is an unconditional covenant.

[32 : 57] And it's carried along by our covenant partner, by Jesus, who's God's covenant partner. Let us live in accordance with that. And then we will have a teaching.

We will have teaching. We will have witness that has some credibility. But the whole key is to live in union and communion with Jesus Christ, who is our great high priest.

I end with the words of 1 Peter 2, verse 4. As you come to him, the living stone, rejected by humans, but chosen by God and precious to him, you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God, how?

Through Jesus Christ. To him be all the praise. Amen. Amen.