

Unit I: God Requires Justice

Justice for All

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 50:1-15
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Malachi 2-3
PRINT PASSAGE: Malachi 2:1-9; 3:5-6

Key Verse—If ye will not hear, and if ye will not lay it to heart, to give glory unto my name, saith the LORD of hosts, I will even send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings: yea, I have cursed them already, because ye do not lay it to heart. (Malachi 2:2, KJV)

.....
“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, NIV)

Lesson Aims

As a result of experiencing this lesson, you should be able to do these things:

- Understand the significance of justice for spiritual leadership.
- Affirm the value of covenanted reverence of God for leadership.
- Practice just spiritual leadership.

*Key Terms

Covenant (2:4)—Hebrew: *bēriyth* (ber-ēth’): league; treaty; alliance; agreement; pledge.

Oppress (3:5)—Hebrew: *ashaq* (aw-shak’): to wrong or extort; defraud; get deceitfully.

Priests (2:1)—Hebrew: *kohen* (ko-hane’): chief ministers; principal officers.

*(Word Study Supplement—Refer to page 2)

Introduction

We are blessed to live in a country that was founded, in principle, on the premise of freedom and justice for all. Although we know that from the beginning, said freedom and justice did not include people of color nor women. However, the principle of “justice for all” was extracted from some knowledge of God’s Word by those seeking political and religious freedom. Our history has proven that there were leaders who did not or could not



The Biblical Context

Notably, Malachi was the last prophet of the Old Testament. Like John the Baptist in the New Testament, he was like a voice in the wilderness of his time. Little is known about Malachi's personal life—his home, his age when he was called, his parents, his occupation. His name means “my messenger” or “missionary.” The date of his prophecy is unknown but has been placed in the late fifth century BC during Nehemiah's return to Persia. By the time Malachi began his ministry, post-exilic worship had become ritualistic, and profaned sacrifices were being offered by the priests and the people. Immorality and social injustice were obvious as well as the sin of robbing God. The Temple had been rebuilt and the sacrificial system had been renewed, but after nearly a century the religious rituals had become empty routines. The priests had become complacent and corrupt. There was a widespread departure from observing the Law, and the iniquities of both priests and people had grown worse than those that had led to their defeat by the Assyrians and the Babylonians. Against this dark setting, Malachi rebuked the corruption, wickedness, injustice, hypocrisy, false worship, and arrogant complacency of the priests and the people. His prophecy is presented in two forms: in a question-and-answer method and as a lawsuit against the people. The text of this lesson presents God's judgment for disregarding His law and against the nation itself.

uphold just dealings for those needing it most. Slavery of the past and the racial divide of today prove this to be true. Yet, God's expectation that leaders act honorably toward their constituents by upholding and defending justice for all has not changed, especially for spiritual leaders. He requires and expects that the leaders of His people promote godly justice. After the prosperous reigns of David and Solomon and the division of the nation of Israel, justice for all became an ongoing challenge as the kings of the two kingdoms and the priesthood became lax in their responsibility to protect and uphold the rights of others. God's response was to call and commission prophets to confront the leadership and attempt to call them back to the promotion of godly justice. Their failure to respond appropriately led to exile for both kingdoms. After the return of the exiles from Babylon and the demise of earlier post-exilic leaders like Zerubbabel, Joshua, Haggai, Zechariah, Ezra, and Nehemiah, justice for all again became a thing of the past. God called another prophet, Malachi, to renew the call for the practice of justice among the spiritual leadership of his day.

ANALYSIS OF THE BIBLICAL TEXT

A Stern Warning (*Malachi 2:1-4*)

KJV

AND NOW, O ye *priests*, this commandment is for you.

2 If ye will not hear, and if ye will not lay it to heart, to give glory unto my name, saith the LORD of hosts, I will even send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings: yea, I have cursed them already, because ye do not lay it to heart.

3 Behold, I will corrupt your seed, and spread dung upon your faces, even the dung of your solemn feasts; and one shall take you away with it.

4 And ye shall know that I have sent this commandment unto you, that my *covenant* might be with Levi, saith the LORD of hosts.

NIV

“AND NOW, you *priests*, this warning is for you.

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.

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.

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

A century had passed since the first exiles had returned from Babylon to Palestine. The Temple had been completed, required sacrifices were being offered, but the priests had become complacent and careless. The people were committing the same sins that had sent them into exile. The priests were specifically warned because spiritual leaders have a greater responsibility to teach, practice, and uphold God’s righteous standards (**verse 1**). The commandment given was for the priests to reform their ways and implied that there was no chance of reducing the severity of the punishment about to be pronounced upon them. God warned these priests that if they refused to listen (change their ways) and sincerely honor His name, then they would be cursed (**verse 2**). In fact, this verse reveals that this curse was irrevocable, and that punishment was definitely coming. There was no possible chance of having more time to get things right. God was going to remove the priests’ blessing. This was twofold. The priests could lose their livelihood because portions of the offerings came to them. Also, it referred to all of God’s gracious benefits, including the blessings they pronounced on the people. We must remember that God is loving and is concerned about those who obediently follow Him. He is also too holy to allow intentional disobedience to go unpunished. The spiritual leaders were not only failing to minister to the people properly but were also profaning God’s name.

Malachi next graphically describes what this punishment would involve (**verse 3**). Because of their flippant attitude toward God, their seed or offering would be affected. There is a double meaning here. For one, this could infer that their disrespectful attitude toward God would have a detrimental effect on their children’s attitude toward Him. It could also be interpreted to mean that poor harvests would result in a decrease in tithes and offerings. Second, the Lord said that He would spread waste, or the offal, from the sacrificial animals on their faces! The excrement or dung was to be removed from the sanctuary and burned outside the camp as unclean. These priests were so unfaithful and revolting to God that just as the refuse was carried away, they and their offerings were to end up on the dung heap out of His presence. For those set aside for this sacred office, this was the ultimate humiliation. God wanted to shock them out of their complacency.

He also desired that His covenant with the priestly tribe of Levi be continuous as it was meant to be when He originally set them apart (**verse 4**). God's discipline is both corrective and restorative. Had these priests listened, they would have been forgiven and restored to continue their service. They, however, refused to do so and received the consequences of their disobedience. The failure of spiritual leaders can have a domino effect among their followers. Weekly we hear God's Word from pulpits, Sunday school classrooms, Bible study sessions, and the participation in personal study. We and our spiritual leaders have no excuse for failing to honor and witness for God with godly lifestyles. When we fail, like these priests did, we can be thankful for the Lord Jesus Christ, our faithful High Priest, interceding for us in the presence of God.

🔍 What Do You Think? What are some examples of God's name's being profaned today?

A Lesson in Contrasts (*Malachi 2:5-9*)

KJV

5 My covenant was with him of life and peace; and I gave them to him for the fear wherewith he feared me, and was afraid before my name.

6 The law of truth was in his mouth, and iniquity was not found in his lips: he walked with me in peace and equity, and did turn many away from iniquity.

7 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.

8 But ye are departed out of the way; ye have caused many to stumble at the law; ye have corrupted the covenant of Levi, saith the LORD of hosts.

9 Therefore have I also made you contemptible and base before all the people, according as ye have not kept my ways, but have been partial in the law.

NIV

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.

6 "True 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.

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.

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."

The priests of Malachi's day had corrupted the purpose of the covenant made with Levi, the priestly tribe. The Lord, through Malachi, contrasted their performance with those of these corrupt priests. First, he reviewed the purpose of this covenant (**verse 5**). Obedience to the covenant was designed to bring life and peace to the nation of Israel and to the Levites. Total obedience to God is the only avenue to enjoying an abundant life and peace with Him. The original priests revered God and stood in awe of His name. The priests Malachi addressed were lineal heirs of Levi and claimed the privileges of the covenant but failed to obey its conditions. The original priests spoke truth, lived right, and were used by God to turn others from iniquity (**verse 6**). As God's earthly messengers, priests were expected to be counselors who dispensed instruction and guidance to those who sought it (**verse 7**). By contrasts, Malachi cited how the priests of his time were failing their high calling. Rather than causing others to turn from iniquity, they were causing others to stumble by wrong living and wrong teaching, and they had corrupted the covenant by failing to live up to its requirements (**verse 8**) and had modified the standards of God's law to obtain the favor of others (**verse 9**). These sins had caused a loss of credibility among the people.

God's expectation that spiritual leaders rightly divide and correctly teach the Word, live godly lives worthy of emulation, and fulfill the requirements of their calling has not changed—nor will the consequences for failing to do so. We should be thankful to God for, pray for, and support spiritual leaders who are striving to fulfill the responsibilities of their calling. Again, we should be grateful to God for Jesus Christ, who perfectly discharges the office of High Priest on our behalf.

? What Do You Think? How can spiritual leaders avoid losing their credibility without compromising to please others?

Judgment and Restoration (*Malachi 3:5-6*)

KJV

5 And I will come near to you to judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, and against the adulterers, and against false swearers, and against those that *oppress* the hireling in his wages, the widow, and the fatherless, and that turn aside the stranger from his right, and fear not me, saith the LORD of hosts.

6 For I am the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.

NIV

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.”

Malachi identified the specific sins of the priests and those of the nation in chapter 2. In response, the people's complacent self-righteousness led them to question God and imply that He favored the wicked and disregarded the righteous. Malachi responded in verse 17, telling them that they had wearied the Lord by questioning His justice and that He was coming in judgment to refine and purify (see 3:1, **5**). This coming judgment was not to be limited to the Levites but would be for the whole nation. Those guilty of sorcery, adultery, cheating workers out of their pay, oppressing widows and orphans, social injustice toward aliens, and failing to reverence God will be purged (**verse 5**). Each of these sins was strictly prohibited in the Mosaic Law. By committing them, they proved their lack of respect for God and the Law. Because of the Lord's unchanging nature, the sinners among the nation had not been consumed (**verse 6**). Despite their history of rebellion, God remained committed to His covenant promises. The basis of hope for future Israel and for us is the immutable character of God and His faithfulness to His Word. For those who have received salvation, the responsibility is to maintain an obedient relationship with Him by presenting themselves to Him daily as living sacrifices, willingly submitting to His will.

🔍 What Do You Think? Identify some of the social conditions that may lead to questioning God's justice. How should the community of faith respond?

A Closing Thought

The spiritual leaders of Malachi's day were guilty of failing to honor God and of profaning His name. Their unfaithfulness caused the people not to take right and wrong seriously. Like parents who fail to discipline their children, these leaders contributed to the spiritual delinquency of the nation. Both leaders and the laity must take God's requirements for spiritual leadership seriously because it is held to a higher level of accountability. Corrupt leaders must be addressed according to the principles of God's Word, and honorable spiritual leadership should be supported, encouraged, and followed.

Your Life

As a part of the community of faith, if you are blessed with spiritual leaders who are godly examples, make an opportunity to personally encourage and thank them for honoring God through their ministry. Commit to continually pray for them as they continue to serve.

Your World!

Corrupt leadership is evident in all areas of society. The community of faith must accept the responsibility to use the right to vote as a means of placing leaders of integrity in governmental positions and seek to follow God's standard for placing spiritual leaders over His people. It must be kept in mind that all leaders will ultimately have to answer to God if they fail to honor Him and use their authority to promote justice for all.



Closing Prayer Dear God, we thank You for providing spiritual leaders who have set and are setting godly examples for us to follow. Keep them by Your power and help us to humbly follow. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Conclusion

(Preparing for Next Week's Lesson)

Next week's lesson begins Unit II, "God Promises a Just Kingdom." The lesson text is Isaiah 42:1-9 and presents a vision of the Messiah as a champion of the justice that God desires.

Home Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY , March 30	"Faith Heroes Acted Justly"	(Hebrews 11:29-35)
TUESDAY , March 31	"Your King Comes Humbly"	(Matthew 21:1-11)
WEDNESDAY , April 1	"A House of Prayer for All Nations"	(Mark 11:15-19)
THURSDAY , April 2	"Neglect Justice at Your Peril"	(Luke 11:42-44)
FRIDAY , April 3	"Jesus, God's Servant Messiah"	(Matthew 12:15-21)
SATURDAY , April 4	"God Will Not Forsake the People"	(Isaiah 42:10-17)
SUNDAY , April 5	"God's Servant to Establish Justice Everywhere"	(Isaiah 42:1-9)

Notes