

In the book of Malachi, God has been speaking against the sins of his people. Last week we heard him speaking against the priests and how they were leading the people astray. Because they were offering up to God sacrifices that were not good: animals which were blind, animals which were maimed, animals which were lame or sick. And in that way they were teaching, by their bad example, the people to take God not very seriously. But this week, we hear God speaking against the priests again, but for a different reason. Because they are also mishandling his Word. They are not teaching his Word in the way that he wants them to. And so as a result, the people are being taught to not take God's Word very seriously either.

So what exactly was the problem here? What exactly were they doing that made God so angry? Well, they were teaching God's Word in a way that was leading people into sin, especially by teaching it in partial ways. They were showing favor to one group, and they were not showing favor to another. They would use God's Word to say one thing to this group and use that same Word to say something different to the other group. Maybe on this side, they were trying to find the favor of the rich or the powerful or maybe just their friends. And they were telling them things like, "God isn't angry with you. You don't need to worry about anything. You don't need to repent of your sins. What you're doing isn't wrong. It's okay. Continue as you are." But that was a problem. They were misapplying the Word of God. And on the other side, they had a group that they might've just been ignoring, or maybe they were being a lot harsher towards them, because they were maybe the poor, the people they didn't like very much. And they were saying things to them, perhaps like, "God doesn't care for you. There's really nothing you can do to make God care for you, so you shouldn't even try." But because they were using God's Word in this way, Christians, saying one thing to one group and one thing to another, they were leading everybody astray. Because some were being led to trust in themselves, to think that everything was fine, when it wasn't. Some were being led into despair, to think that there was no hope for them. But all of them were being led away from God, because they were misusing God's Word. And so God threatened to curse them, to curse even their blessings, and to shame them in the eyes of Israel. Because it is a very serious thing to misuse the Word of God.

And it's not like they didn't have an example to follow! God showed them a perfect example, their forefather Levi, who he called for himself. If they wanted to know how they should teach, if they wanted to know what it meant to be a good priest of God, they only had to look to Levi. Because Levi feared God. "True instruction was in his mouth," the Lord says, "and no wrong was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and he turned many from iniquity." He wasn't using God's Word in one way with one group and another way with another. He wasn't mishandling it. He was speaking the truth. And by speaking the truth to everyone, he led them to repent and turn towards God in a living faith. If the Levites wanted to know what to do, they really only had to look at him.

Because, as God says in verse 7: "The lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts." When the people came to them, they should expect to hear God speaking. They should expect to hear what it was that God wanted to teach them. Not a misuse, not a mishandling, but the very words of the living God. That was the calling that God had raised them up to. And it's a very serious thing, Christians, to speak for the living God.

Now, of course, in the first place, what God says here in Malachi applies especially to pastors, to those who have been called to speak the Word of God to the church today. They have a very high calling. God has raised them up to be "his man," so to speak, to be the one who represents God to the congregation and to the church. That is something that we should take very seriously.

Because to misuse that Word, to use it in ways God never wanted it to be used, or to apply it in one way with some people and apply it in another way with other people, will bring a curse upon his teaching. As James tells us in chapter 3, verse 1: "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness." God holds pastors to a very high standard. He holds them responsible for everything that they say in his name. And that is a very serious thing, one that all pastors should take very seriously. And not to be frivolous about it or not to be silly about it, but to treat that calling with the seriousness it deserves. Because, as Paul tells us in 1 Timothy, chapter 4, speaking to pastors again: "Set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity." People should be able to look at their pastors and to learn what it means to be a Christian, to learn what it means to live as a Christian. And that means that it is a very serious thing, then, to speak for the living God. And all pastors should take that calling very seriously.

But it is also something that applies to all of you, Christians. Because as we heard last week, you are all priests, priests of Jesus Christ who offer up spiritual sacrifices: the sacrifices of prayer, the sacrifices of praise, the sacrifices of thanksgiving and of good works. It is a high calling which you have in Jesus Christ. And even if not all of you are called to teach, we are all still called to treat God's Word seriously. And so the question that Malachi asks you this evening, asks everyone of you is: do you treat God's Word seriously? Do you treat it with the seriousness it deserves? Do you lay it to your heart? Do you listen to what it has to say? Delighting in it and even changing the way that you live because of what it says? Do you listen to that Word in the hard things? When God's Word says something that maybe you don't agree with at first, but you change the way that you think, because it is the words of the living God? And do you apply that Word rightly to yourselves? Not using it favorably toward yourself and unfavorably towards everybody else? Using God's Word in a way of justifying sin? Take a passage, for example, like Paul saying that we are "justified by faith alone." Some might use that to say, "well, then it doesn't matter what I do, because I'm forgiven anyway!" But that would be misusing God's Word. Or to take Jesus's words to "Judge not, lest ye be judged," and to take that to mean, "I should never say anything against evil, because people might think badly of me. They might judge me for what I have to say." Christians, we are called to treat God's Word seriously. Every one of us. Because this is the words which he has given to us.

And besides, every one of you is also an example, not only to the church, not only to each other, but also to the world. The world sees how you consider God's Word. Because consider what Jesus has to say in Matthew chapter 5: "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden, nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." Christians, you are called to be salt and light in the world, things which cannot be hidden. And the world will consider what it means to be a

Christian by the way in which we live. And so we should take God's Word seriously, then, so that we will be a good witness, not only to the church, but also to the entire world.

Because in this, Christians, you also have an example--one far greater than Levi, in fact. A greater high priest than Levi ever was, as the book of Hebrews tells us--our Lord Jesus Christ. Because Jesus did not misuse the word which he was given. Jesus spoke that Word plainly to all around him, and equally to all around him. He was not playing favorites. He was not misusing it. He spoke that word of repentance and the kingdom of God to all who would hear. And Jesus spoke that word even when it made him unpopular to do so, even when the world hated him as a result. Because he held up that word with the seriousness which it deserves. And Christians, this same Jesus speaks to you today, and he brings to you forgiveness. Forgiveness for when we have stumbled, forgiveness for when we have not been so serious. But he has given you the Holy Spirit to lift you up and to make you a new creation, so that we can take his Word seriously, so that we can walk in the light that he has called us to walk.

So Christians, let us follow his example. Let us take his Word seriously, because it is the words of everlasting life, the words which lead us to Jesus Christ, the words which lead us to heaven.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have given us your Son, Jesus Christ, to speak to us the words of truth and life. We pray that you would help us always to hold onto those words and to listen to him, because he is our life. In his name we pray. Amen.