

Malachi 1:6-2:9

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[0 : 00] You may find it helpful to have your Bibles open with you again to Malachi. It's on page 801 of the church Bibles.

It's been said before that example is not the main thing in influencing others. It is the only thing. If that's true, isn't it? We know that even in church life we are moved to behave and think and pray and even worship in a certain way through examples of others.

We're so easily influenced, aren't we? So as we turn to Malachi this morning, his message will be particularly searching for a certain group of people here this morning.

The influencers. The leaders who shape our worship and our spirituality in this church. Malachi's search, like it, penetrates and we wonder where is it going to land this morning?

[1 : 14] Drop your eye down to chapter 2 verse 1. And now, O priests, this command is for you. Malachi addresses the priests.

He addresses them in chapter 1 verse 6 as well at the beginning of our reading this morning. So easy to blame leaders, isn't it?

When things go wrong. But in their case, in Malachi's time, there was truth in that. There lies a gloomy undercurrent in the relationship between God and his people.

Do you remember after the return from exile, this little group are sent back to Judah. And they're going through the motions of living as God's people. There is structure to their worship.

The temple is built. But there is no substance to it. And the priests are the ones held responsible. Now I want to say that we do not have priests in this church.

[2 : 14] Okay? But Malachi is talking, isn't he, here, to the people who influenced the congregation. They would have been the men who ran the sacrifices.

They taught the scripture. They were the ones who set an example. The apostle Paul shows a link between the Old Testament priesthood and New Testament ministry.

He calls himself a minister of Jesus Christ in the priestly service of the gospel of God. And so the spotlight of Malachi is this morning on the minister.

And on the associate minister. On the elders. On those who teach. On those who lead worship. The heat is on this pulpit.

And the man who stands in it. And on the elders. And on the deacons. Because their example is more than just the main thing in influencing you in all of us. Now, the rest of you don't get to sit there and rub your hands together now.

[3 : 18] And think this is going to be juicy. Because all of the people are involved here. Elders and deacons are not on some kind of higher level of spirituality.

That is nonsense. That is nonsense. What is expected of them is universally expected, actually, of all Christians. But I do want you to be aware, as Malachi addresses the priests here, of who influences you.

And how they do that. And what your leaders are up to. So that you can pray for them. And you can encourage them. And you can call them out, if necessary.

Because in Malachi's day, the problem wasn't that they didn't have leaders. Or they weren't there. Or they weren't doing enough. Their problem was not that their schedules were empty.

But their hearts were empty. Chapter 2, verse 8. God says to them, you've caused many to stumble. It's an awful appraisal of a minister, isn't it?

[4 : 21] He led many to stumble. He ruined the church. I wonder if you've heard stories like that. Maybe you've been hurt by church leaders. Who've behaved badly in the past.

And we're easily influenced, aren't we? So he diagnoses the problem early on as he speaks to them. He says, something is missing in your service, priests. And this affects the whole

congregation.

It is not technique. It is not strategy. It is not that your programs are wrong. Priests and elders and ministers. What was missing? Well, what is in your heart is missing, first of all.

Namely, fear and honour. Fear and honour is missing from your hearts. Just look at verse 6 of chapter 1.

A son honours his father and a servant his master. If then I'm a father, where is my honour? And if I'm a master, where is my fear? This is what is missing, priests.

[5 : 26] You're not afraid of me, says God. You don't respect me. He uses the image of a father, doesn't he there, to make his point. Now I love that image of God being our father.

A God who comforts us. A God who protects us. And shows affection towards us as a good father should. But you know, that is not the only thing a good father should do, is it?

And maybe we've gone slightly askew on that, of our model of a father in our modern age on TV. He is the kind of beer-guzzling, man-cave-dwelling, bringer of fun.

He's like the playmate, isn't he, for the kids. There is that, of course. But there needs to be that combination of affection and fear.

Of respect and honour. The Lord says, honour your father and your mother, doesn't he? Not play with your father. We all know, don't we, that there are things that we would not do if father walked in the room.

[6 : 32] Hands quickly jerk out of the biscuit tin. The weapon used against your brother or your sister, your sibling, is quickly hidden behind your back, isn't it? We don't do this or that when dad walks in.

And so God says, if you like calling me father, if I am your father, you cannot have the affection without the respect.

Where's my respect? Where's my fear? I walk in the room, priests, and yet your behaviour doesn't seem to change. And if I'm your master, if I'm your boss, where's my fear?

Whose opinion matters most of you? You know how to fear your master, your boss at work. So where's my respect and fear? As we think about fear and honour with God, don't get me wrong on this.

Because reverence, fear and honour of God is not the same as dourness and legalism and barren silence and sternness.

[7 : 40] Somebody once said that the best way that Satan can destroy reverence is to caricature it. And he's done a really good job of that, hasn't he? He gives us the picture of the kind of 1950s grey, stunted, boring Christian.

The joyless Christian. He's gotten us into thinking that fearing God is dry and old-fashioned and slightly dramatic. But it isn't that.

To fear God is to have that sense of awe. The priests that serve in a considered and reverent and sincere, heartfelt way.

And God reflects in chapter 2 on a time when Levi, when the priests did do that. Just look at chapter 2 verse 5. He, Levi, stood in awe of my name.

That is how the priests should be. God, the consuming fire, is warming, isn't he? And comforting and life-giving. And yet, fire is fearsome and dangerous.

[8 : 48] You should fear and honour me and you're not doing that to priests. I want you to remember that he is speaking here to a particular group of people. He is addressing the priests at a particular time.

So I don't want you to go and look for things in your own lives that may not necessarily be there. I don't want you to become overly introspective and self-pitying. I know many of you do fear the Lord. I know that. But perhaps some of us and all of us really need to think about this again. We need to ask whose opinion of our life matters most.

Our boss? Our family? Who do we strive to please most? And the priests particularly. It is so subtle, isn't it?

It's become normalised for them. So much so that they don't know they're even doing it. Chapter 1 verse 6. We get another one of these arguments in Malachi.

[9 : 50] God says, you've despised my name. And they say, how have we despised your name? We're oblivious to it, aren't they?

God says, well hang on. I can tell you there is no awe in your heart. And I can see that from what is in your hands. No awe in your heart.

Because of what is in your hands. Secondly. I can tell from the gifts that you bring to me as priests. That your heart is not in it. Go to someone's house for a meal, don't you? And maybe take a gift with you. A box of chocolates or whatever.

But imagine I come round to your house. And I bring round a half-eaten box of chocolates. I've eaten all the ones I like.

[10:45] And I've left you with all the hazelnut ones. And I've sucked off all of the chocolate. And put the hazelnuts back in the boxes. And I say, oh thanks for having me for dinner.

But my gifts show my attitude, don't they? And the offerings and the sacrifices that they were bringing were defective. They'd offer blind and lame and sick animals.

When they could have brought so much more. Verse 14. Cursed be the cheats who have a male in his flock and vows it. And yet sacrifices a blemished animal.

They were bringing second-hand used, broken, worn-out goods. That they got at the jumble sale. And they were wrapping it up, putting a bow on it.

And hoping that God didn't notice. And God says, if you're doing that, priests. I know that your hearts are not in it. And actually you might as well not bother at all.

[11:48] Look down with me at chapter 1, verse 10. Oh, that there were one who would shut the doors. That you might not kindle fire on my altar in vain.

That is a staggering verse, isn't it? Under what possible circumstance would it be better to close the temple down altogether? The whole sacrificial system was mandated by God.

They had to do it, didn't they? It was part of the law. It was a non-negotiable. But there is one exception here. It would be better to call it a day.

To put a stop to the whole thing. If you're going to bring me second-rate offerings, you might as well not bother. The professionals, the influencers, the priests, they are saying, aren't they?

What is the bare minimum that we can get away with? And what they were doing was warping the whole purpose of worship. It would have been interesting to ask them, wouldn't it, what do you think the purpose of your sacrifices is?

[12:53] Why are you worshipping God? It would be interesting to ask you that. What makes church worship successful? We get to the end of a service and we think, well, that was good.

When it's done well. How do we rate our church experience? What are you actually here for? Are you here for what it makes you feel?

How it stirs your emotions? Whether you like the songs or the preaching? Of course those things are good, aren't they? But verse 10 shows us, isn't it?

God says, oh, that the doors were shut. Why? I have no pleasure in you. The whole point of the temple, the whole point of the priests and the worship, God says, is my pleasure.

It's all for me. Verse 10, he says, it's my altar. It's about me. When that's not the main aim, however wonderful that we might feel, we might as well say, Paul Hosea, don't bother opening up in the morning.

[14:04] When the priests are doing it all for their own sake, for a bit of prestige or praise or even for money, what was in their hands showed God what was in their hearts.

It's like that they are coming to God's house and they are guests. And the gifts that you are bringing, he says, they are the stuff that you don't want anyway, the duds of the flock.

It is jumble sale Christianity. Spirituality. And God is saying, you're taking the mick here. Verses 8 and 9, you know how to give good gifts.

That's the thing. You know how to give good gifts to the people who you really respect. Your governor. And you wouldn't give a gift like that to him or to your boss and expect a blessing. Your governor, who isn't even legit. He's put there by a Persian emperor. He's not even your true master. So why think you can do that with me? You can pull a fast one with me.

[15:05] You wouldn't turn up to work half asleep. You wouldn't yawn through a board meeting and do your work on a bit of scrap of paper and expect smiles and a raise from your boss.

You think you can give me the dregs, the second hand stuff. Stuff that you're not bothered about. So the priests, they were responsible for letting the congregation get away with things like this.

Their gifts set the tone. And it's so subtle, isn't it? Because the structure is all there. The worship is happening.

There's lots of activity. There's lots of sacrificing going on. The temple is running. All of the programs are running. And it's all very busy. But God says structure is not much without substance. I think one of the ways that we are susceptible as a church is in our giving, financial giving. [16:07] But I'm not going to talk about that again. But also in our formal worship in the time that we're in now. And it's a really crucial time, isn't it? As we come together to worship God on a Sunday.

And God commands that we do that. It's in our service. And these orders of service that we get, that we print out every week, they're really important.

They're well thought through. They follow a certain pattern of worship that is biblical. The gospel, if you haven't noticed, is re-enacted every week.

As we hear God's call to worship and as we confess and as we hear his word. And so these orders of worship are important and they're right. We pride ourselves, I think, in what we call reformed worship.

But structure is no substitute for the lack of substance. And if we come half asleep, we come and say our prayers and we get through the script.

[17:16] Jesus says God is seeking worshippers to worship him in spirit and in truth. Not jumble sale worshippers. And the elders and the leaders are responsible examples of that.

Salvador Dali, the painter, said that the secret of my influence is that it's always remained a secret. And great influence happens like that, doesn't it?

Without us knowing it. And it happens so subtly. It can happen just as leaders shape the culture of the church. In the secret things for ill or for good.

So often how the leaders do it as well as what they do. How they lead in prayer. How they preach. How they teach. How they live.

Richard Baxter, the great pastor of the 17th century. He wrote a book to student pastors called The Reformed Pastor in the mid-1600s.

[18:23] And it sobers ministers up really. He says a pastor might spend an hour preparing to speak for a minute on a Sunday. But he feels that an hour seems too much to study how to live all week.

Preachers say be doers of the word and not hearers only. But he turns that around. We ought to be doers of the word and not speakers only.

And Malachi agrees, doesn't he? He's saying that there is much more to the priesthood than ticking boxes and bringing offerings. Than doing the bare minimum.

And so much more to pastoring and deaconing and eldering and leading and influencing than ticking boxes and getting the job done. It was said of the preacher Robert Murray McShane that a non-believer came into one of his services once.

And he was apparently converted in the first two words of his opening prayer. And the words were simply, holy father. And this guy in the congregation was converted.

[19:31] But it wasn't just those words, was it? It was the way he said it. And the life that went with the prayer. McShane feared God and honoured him.

He brought his best. But the priests here, they lead people astray. Because their gifts and offerings and service were just the bare minimum.

And the influence spread. And God says you might as well not bother at all. What was going on there? Looking at this passage, I think it's just that they were underwhelmed.

And they were bored with the work. They were underwhelmed with God. God reads their minds, doesn't he, in verse 13. You say, what a weariness this is.

And you snorted it. Now they weren't just weary in the work. That is normal, isn't it? To be tired in the service of the Lord. To be fed up once in a while.

[20:34] Or to get discouraged or to be tired. That is not what they were doing. They weren't weary in the work. They were weary of the work altogether. They'd say, what a drag.

What a nuisance. Coming to church. Serving. Serving the Lord. I'll just give the bare minimum. And God judges them for the influence they have.

For this jungle sale religion. I've seen what's in your hearts. Because I've seen what's in your hands. And thirdly, I've seen what's on your lips.

Seen what's on your lips. Just drop your eye down to chapter 2, verse 7. For 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 priesthood was set up. God gave the responsibility of the priesthood to the tribe of Levi. [21 : 37] And they had to do two things, really. He says to them in Deuteronomy that they will teach Jacob your rules and Israel the law. And they shall put incense and burnt offerings on the altar.

And these priests fail at doing both of those things, don't they? Their sacrifices and gifts are not good. And their teaching is wrong as well.

They teach people what they want to hear rather than what God says. Look at verse 9. They show partiality in their instruction. One answer to one set of people is different to another set of people. Depending on how the priest likes them or not. And he says you've caused many to stumble by your instruction. We don't know exactly what they were saying or what they weren't saying. Maybe they were not prepared to say difficult things. Maybe they were teaching too harshly. Maybe they were being legalistic. They weren't preaching Christ enough.

[22 : 40] Or they didn't grasp grace. God says either way, they should have been like the Levi of old again. Once upon a time, Levi. Verse 6. True instruction was in his mouth.

No wrong was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and in uprightness. And he turned many from iniquity. His life matched his teaching.

George Whitefield was on a boat across the Atlantic. He was military chaplain on the Whittaker in the 18th century. And there were two other ships kind of escorting this ship.

And he noticed as soon as he boarded that the moral tone was particularly low on the ship. They used to swear at him. They used to gamble.

They would call him a phony. They would deride him, calling him an imposter. But he understood the power of influence. And he understood the power of true instruction in the Lord's words.

[23 : 39] He said that his mission was to save, to know nothing and teach nothing except Christ crucified. So every day he read public prayers. He witnessed.

He would go out on the deck at night and try and meet the sailors and reason with them about the gospel. He would preach every morning until eventually two of the captains of these ships would stand either side of him as he preached.

And eventually the captain of the Whittaker ordered a drumbeat to mark the time for worship. And all three ships came together and worshipped Whitefield's God.

It's amazing. That was the power of true instruction. Turning many away from wrong living. But we've seen it go the other way, haven't we?

And in the priesthood here we see a pattern which has been repeated in churches actually ever since. The beginning of chapter 2, God speaks to them.

[24 : 45] He says, I'll send my curse upon you. I'll curse your blessings. They were the blessings that they were giving to the people on behalf of God.

God says, I'm going to make them futile. I'm going to make your work ineffective. I'm going to turn your sermons into sedatives.

I'm going to put your congregation to sleep. I'm going to make you ineffectual. And you'll be held in contempt by your congregation. There's this powerful imagery, isn't there, in verse 3.

I'll spread dung on your faces. It was the dung that was in the entrails of the animals that would have been sacrificed, that was thrown away and burnt.

And God says, I'll unceremoniously daub that on your face. Faces that should have been lifted to the Lord are going to be covered with dung.

[25 : 45] I'll return the trash that you brought to my house as a gift upon you. And hasn't that happened again and again?

Where churches sit empty, not because they've lost touch with young people, or they haven't got enough money, or they don't know how to use social media, or they haven't got a snazzy enough website.

But because their instruction has caused many to stumble. And they've stopped preaching the gospel. And God has made them ineffective.

J.I. Packer compares the content of preaching a hundred years ago to what it is now in many churches.

He says, the subject of the gospel was God and his ways with men. But the subject now is man and the help God gives him.

[26 : 45] See the difference there? And God has judged them for the influence they have on society. You know, you see, don't you, so often churches, church buildings that are nightclubs, or pubs, or markets, or whatever.

And there is something in this, isn't there, that God has said, if you're going to do jumbled sale Christianity, then actually don't bother. We might as well close the doors. We might as well stick a pub in there instead.

That actually would be better for everybody concerned. And the church in so many places is held in contempt. Not because it doesn't agree with society, but because it doesn't stand out from the culture.

And it has dung on its face. As we draw to a close, you might feel like you've just been through a meat grinder for the last 25 minutes. All right.

All right. I'm aware that if we get this passage wrong here, we'll actually just learn to fake it better. As elders and as leaders, as all of us, as we worship.

[27 : 55] And elders might think, who is worthy for this task, really? We look at our leaders, don't we, and we think we're stuffed. We should do.

This passage, this passage, this rebuke on the priests makes us very aware of the importance of those who influence us.

And the importance of the priests. And we need a much better priest than the Israelites had here, don't we? If the doors are going to stay open in this church, we need a better priest.

We know eventually the Levitical priests were removed. The temple was destroyed in 70 AD. You might as well close the temple down, God says.

And since you haven't, I will. And he does. But as we go through Malachi in chapter 3, Malachi speaks of a messenger.

[28 : 59] Who is going to come to the temple and he is going to refine. He will come quickly to his temple. He'll come like a refiner's fire. And who can endure the day of his coming.

And Jesus Christ comes, doesn't he, in the New Testament. And he quickly comes to his temple.

And he turns over the tables in the literal jumble sale that is happening in the temple.

And he says, I'll destroy this temple. I'll shut the doors of this temple. And I'll rebuild it. Jesus Christ comes and he does what Malachi's priests have not done.

And he brings a heart and hands and lips full of things that please God. He comes as a pure and perfect and unblemished lamb sacrifice.

The best of the flock. I'm awful at giving good gifts. Emma is really good at giving good gifts. She's not here now so she won't be embarrassed by this. She's always organised.

[30 : 08] She remembers people's birthdays. Buys the present in advance. And it's always great. I forget things. I have to run to the garage normally and get some old flowers or something like that.

But she's organised. And she'll get the present and she'll say, you know it's so and so's birthday this week. And I'll say, yeah of course. Well done. Well, can I sign my name on the card that you've got? Can I take some credit? Can I be involved? As we come to the Lord's table today, we see, don't we, the value of his gifts and his sacrifice on the altar.

He is a priest who truly leads us in worship because he gives his all, not just the bare minimum.

Without him as priest, we might as well not bother this morning. Our gifts are never going to be enough in themselves, are they? But he says to us, doesn't he, as we come to the table, I'll let you sign your name on the card.

[31 : 18] You can be included and joined with me as I give this great gift to our God. And he pulls out all the stops. He gives it all.

He gives his life. And there is one in whom our gifts then and our service is pleasing. So we're encouraged here, aren't we, to come and entreat the favour of the Lord.

Malachi chapter 1 verse 9. That he may be gracious to us and to fear him in our hearts. And to give him our all. To honour him with our lips and our lives.

And to give him our best. Not jumble sale Christianity. And we're called to do that now because Jesus Christ gave his best.

Let's pray together.