

# Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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For reply: Email: [truthfortoday@aol.com](mailto:truthfortoday@aol.com)

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**Speaker:** Mr. Ian Britton

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## Malachi - The Dangers of Spiritual Blindness: Despising God's name (Malachi 1:6-2:9)

### Introduction

Whom do you represent, apart from yourself? Maybe you sometimes speak for your employer, or a voluntary organisation you work with. Perhaps you wear a uniform, or a team kit, and are seen by others to stand for that group or club. I recently reminded my team at work that they all need to be conscious of the image they project in meetings and on phone calls. I set out for them how I want the team to be seen, and reminded them that for some people, they might be the only representative of the team they ever meet. This means they need to consider the impact of how they speak and act, remembering that they are building the team's image, whether they are doing it consciously or unconsciously.

In Malachi's day, the public representatives of God were the priests. It was vital that they accurately represented Jehovah to the people of Israel, and the nations outside. To do this properly, they needed to have a deep reverence for God, a thorough knowledge of Him and His character, and a desire to live in ways that would accurately represent that character. This makes it all the more shocking that God, through Malachi, accuses the priests of despising His name.

Let's read the first section of our passage for this morning, Malachi 1:6-8. *"A son honours his father, and a servant his master. If then I am the Father, where is My honour? And if I am a Master, where is My reverence?" Says the LORD of hosts to you priests who despise My name. 'Yet you say, 'In what way have we despised Your name?' You offer defiled food on My altar, but say, 'In what way have we defiled You?' By saying, 'The table of the LORD is contemptible,' And when you offer the blind as a sacrifice, is it not evil? And when you offer the lame and sick, is it not evil? Offer it then to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you favourably?' Says the LORD of Hosts."*

### God's name

God's name isn't just a label, it stands for Who, and what, He actually is. To despise God's name is therefore to despise God Himself. To view Him with scorn and contempt. To speak and act as if He, is of little or no importance, and far beneath us. It is of great significance then if God's priests act in this way.

### We are all priests now

Before we get carried away with our outrage at how the priests acted nearly two and a half thousand years ago, let's remind ourselves of the position we occupy as believers in the Lord Jesus today. In Malachi's time the priests were a sub-group of God's people. They had special privileges and responsibilities relating to the service of God. They were all members of the tribe of Levi, a tribe that had a special role to play in approaching God. But they were also descendants of Aaron, and therefore a sub-set of the tribe of Levi. They were the only people authorised to make sacrifices for the Israelites, and they had access to Jehovah in a way that the rest of the nation, even they rest of the tribe of Levi, did not.

Those kinds of distinctions and restrictions no longer exist in Christianity. **All** believers in the Lord Jesus are accounted as priests, and have the privileges and responsibilities that belong to that role. This is what, in the Reformation, became known as "the priesthood of all believers" (see 1 Peter 2:5-9). We'll touch on what that means in a moment - for now, we need to recognise that **we** occupy the position that the priests did when Malachi was writing his book. We can learn historical lessons about how the priests failed God, His people and the nations, 2,400 years ago, but we also need to take a good look at what lessons we should apply to ourselves today, and consider carefully if we too might be despising God's name.

### What a priest does

I will just read sections of a passage from 1 Peter 2:5-9 to give us the context of New Testament priesthood. *"You*

*also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. Therefore, it is also contained in the Scripture, 'Behold I lay in Zion a chief cornerstone, elect, precious, and he who believes on Him will by no means be put to shame.' ... But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light."*

This passage contains a whole string of metaphors for Christ's church and its members. We are pictured as "living stones" being built together into a "spiritual house" (1 Peter 2:5). The physical temple of God, consisting of literal stones, which was the place where God dwelt, and was to be met with, has now been replaced by a "house" (the church) that consists of "living stones" (the believers in the Lord Jesus). This is now the place where God takes up residence and where He is to be worshipped.

But we (the believers) are not just the stones and the house, we are also the priests, "a holy priesthood", according to 1 Peter 2:5, who should offer up "spiritual sacrifices." This corresponds to that part of the Old Testament priests' work which consisted of bringing men near to God by the offering of the prescribed sacrifices.

To cover the topic of priesthood properly, we would need to spend some time in the book of Hebrews, where we can read a great deal about Jesus as our "great High Priest". We have no time for that today, but I will read one verse, Hebrews 10:12, that will remind us that we no longer need to make sacrifices to deal with our sins: "But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God." It is often accurately remarked, that the tabernacle and the temple had no chairs as part of their furniture. The job of an Old Testament priest was never done. There was always another sacrifice to be made - no priest ever sat down in God's presence. Christ Jesus, made one all-encompassing sacrifice and then sat down permanently! That sacrifice needs no repeating and no supplementing. We remember that sacrifice every time we remember Christ's death in the breaking of bread and drinking of wine. Doubtless we will remember it still when we see Him face to face in heaven. But it will never be made again. Today, we bring our praises and appreciation of Christ to God our Father, and they are acceptable to God "through Jesus Christ". There are many "living stones", but only one "chief cornerstone". We make many spiritual sacrifices, He only needed to make one!

If Aaronic priests had to represent men before God, they also had a responsibility to represent God before men. That is, they were to make God and His character known, particularly to the nation of Israel. This aspect of their work seems to be picked up in 1 Peter 2:9 in the expression, "royal priesthood."

As royal priests, believers are to proclaim the praises of the One who called us. This will include proclamation before other believers, but it seems to principally refer to our responsibility to proclaim the Lord Jesus to those who don't yet know Him. This takes us beyond the scope of Old Testament priests, whose job was almost exclusively restricted to the people of Israel.

In summary, our role as New Testament priests has much greater privileges, and bears much greater responsibility, than the role of Old Testament priest ever did. We should therefore pay very close attention to where they failed, and see to it, with the Lord's grace and power, that we don't make the same mistakes ourselves!

### **Broken relationships**

It's time to dive back into Malachi 1:6-2:9. The world today is full of broken relationships. Broken marriages, shattered friendships; they are piled up all around us. Relationships are beautiful, but fragile things. They take consistent hard work from both sides, and they are much easier to break than they are to build. Our relationship with God is a little different in several ways.

#### **a. God never fails on His side of the relationship**

He may test us, and sometimes stretches our faith to the limit, but He doesn't fail, and He won't mess things up from His side. If our relationship with God is damaged, it is always our fault.

#### **b. God never gives up or walks away**

Sometimes it does feel like He has left us completely alone, but that is never really the case. Human relationships can be so badly damaged by the actions of one or more parties, that they are beyond complete repair. It may just be possible to patch something together, but trust and confidence have been permanently damaged. It is never like that between us and God - it truly is not! We may genuinely be guilty of things that no human being could ever forgive and forget, but God is not a human being! Our sins might have consequences that continue for decades afterwards, but they never have the consequence of taking us beyond God's forgiveness, or beyond the efficacy of Christ's death and resurrection.

But even our relationship with God can be damaged in the short-term by our actions, and the priests' relationship with God was badly broken at the time Malachi wrote.

The first relationship mentioned in Malachi 1:6 is that between father and son. The relationship of a son to a father should be one of respect and love. It should be a strong family bond with a shared "heritage" and a sense of shared future. The next relationship, in Malachi 1:6, is that between master and servant. This should be a bond of authority and duty, with a sense of fear and reverence. But God has to say, *"If then I am the Father, where is My honour? And if I am a Master, where is my reverence?"* They had failed in the higher duty of being sons, and the lesser duty of being servants, but they were in complete denial about their shortcomings. We get a sense of quibbling and questioning of God as He makes statements about them. "[You] despise My name", says God. "In what way have we despised Your name?", they retort. "You offer defiled food.", says God and they shoot straight back, "In what way have we defiled You?" (see Malachi 1:6-7)

The sad truth is that the nature and tone of their responses prove clearly their contempt for God, even while their words deny it! The pertinent question for us is, how do we respond when God talks to us? I don't mean that we hear audible voices from heaven, but when God speaks clearly to our conscience, either directly from His word, or through one of His servants, what kind of answer do we give? Do we recognise the querulous tone of these priests in our own responses as we seek to deny God's charges against us?

The bottom line for these priests was that God was just too much trouble! God, and His service, got in the way of the things that really mattered to them. Serving Him had become an inconvenience, and they did it with the surliness and ill-grace of spoilt children or disgruntled employees. Remember, as we run through the specific issues, to ask yourself if you see any of these symptoms in your own relationship with your heavenly Father.

## Issues

### 1. They give God the leftovers, and begrudge Him even that.

The instructions given to Moses, and set out in Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy, are very explicit about what constituted a suitable animal for a sacrifice to Jehovah. Just one example of many, taken from Leviticus 22:21-22 will suffice. *"A sacrifice ... must be perfect to be accepted; there shall be no defect in it. Those [animals] that are blind or broken or maimed, or have an ulcer or eczema or scabs, you shall not offer to the LORD, nor make an offering by fire of them on the altar to the LORD."* But these men offered, blind, lame and sick animals. They even brought stolen animals to God!

God ironically suggests that they try making such offerings to the local governor as a present or a tax, and see how acceptable he finds it! They held God in less esteem than the local, gentile governor.

God could have whatever was left over when they had used the best for their own purposes. Even then, the gift was offered begrudgingly and without grace. Before we rush to condemn, however justly, such shocking behaviour, we need to examine our own hearts for the same attitudes. Consider our time, our abilities, our resources, how willingly are they offered to our Saviour God? The attitude of King David was, *"[I will not] offer to the LORD my God with that which costs me nothing"* (see 1 Chronicles 21:24, 2 Samuel 24:24, and *"All things come from You, and of Your own we have given You"* (1 Chronicles 29:14). We need to give to God with the same attitude. To do otherwise betrays a disrespect for the God we claim to honour.

### 2. There is no joy in the relationship

Another snippet from our section, Malachi 1:11b-13, *"For My name shall be great among the nations', says the LORD of hosts. 'But you profane it, in that you say, 'The table of the LORD is defiled; and its fruit, its food, is contemptible.' You also say, 'Oh what a weariness!' And you sneer at it,' says the LORD of hosts."* The joyful service of God has become a weariness! It is a relationship without joy, and one party sneers at something that is precious to the other. We can all think of human relationships like that, but how desperately sad when it applies to our relationship with God! One of the ironies of this sorry situation is that it was the privilege of the priests to eat food from certain of the sacrifices they made. So, in short-changing God, they managed to short-change themselves!

The biggest loser when my relationship with God is soured by my actions, or inactions, is always me, and a loss of joy in that relationship, or a sense of weariness in it, are warning signs that I need to take urgent action.

### 3. They misrepresent God

A further section from our portion in Malachi, Malachi 2:5-7. *"My covenant was with [Levi], one of life and peace, and I*

*gave them to him that he might fear Me; so he feared Me and was reverent before My name. The law of truth was in his mouth, and injustice was not found on his lips. He walked with Me in peace and equity, and turned many away from iniquity. For the lips of a priest should keep knowledge, and people should seek the law from his mouth; for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts."*

We have noted several times already that it is the duty of a priest to represent God to the people. In the section we have just read, God recalls the times when the priests acted faithfully. These include the actions of all the tribe of Levi after Israel had sinned with the golden calf in Exodus 32:1-35, and the faithfulness of a priest called Phinehas, recorded in Numbers 25:7-9, when his apparently harsh actions, stopped a plague that had already killed 24,000 people. These people feared God and acted in ways that demonstrated His character of righteousness and holiness. People looked to them to find out what God was like. The priests of Malachi's day acted in ways that demonstrated pretty much the opposite of what God was like, and anybody looking to them for clues to God's character would have been completely misled. What about us today? People, both in the church and beyond it, watch us, and note how we act and speak. As New Testament priests, how faithfully do we represent God in our day?

#### **4. They lead others astray**

Another part of a priest's job was to bring straying sheep back to God. We read a few moments ago of a priest walking faithfully that, *"He walked with Me in peace and equity, and turned many away from iniquity"* (Malachi 2:6). But these priests were doing just the reverse. In Malachi 2:8 we read, *"But you have departed from the way; you have caused many to stumble at the law. You have corrupted the covenant of Levi," says the LORD of hosts.*" Leaders lead. If they are following the right path, they lead people to a good destination. If they go astray themselves, they lead people into difficulty and distress. These priests had *"departed from the way"* and consequently they *"caused many to stumble."* Either people followed them, and made the same bad choices they did, or they were so revolted by what the priests did that it gave them a bad impression of the whole law of God, and they turned away in disgust. Either way, the result was that their own departure from God led others to go astray as well. It isn't hard for us to spot the application for ourselves.

#### **5. The Priests were once zealous for God and His glory, now they despise both it and Him**

The priests were failing to help others and had lost their joy in God, but the root accusation, is that they despised God's name. How had they got here? The priests and Levites were once renowned for their commitment to God and the zeal with which they sought to defend His glory. It is quite some departure to end up despising God! Most journeys are made up of a series of small steps. They gradually became less concerned about the God they served, and more concerned about what they were getting out of the deal. Things slowly slipped round so that they gave less and less to God, and begrudged the little they did give. The less they gave to God, the lower their evaluation of Him became, until one day they despised Him completely. The transformation had been so gradual, they didn't seem to recognise it themselves. They rebutted God's accusations and asked for explanations. Perhaps this is the most common way for any of us to get away from the path of faithful Christian living and service: little by little, in small almost imperceptible steps, until we wake up and find we are totally off course!

#### **6. God is now as tired of them as they are of Him**

The unhappy outcome of all this turning away from God, is that finally, God turns away from them. We read Malachi 1:10, *"Who is there even among you who would shut the doors, so that you would not kindle fire on my altar in vain? I have no pleasure in you," says the LORD of hosts. 'Nor will I accept an offering from your hands.'*" God looks for somebody to close the temple door, so that the begrudged, meaningless sacrifices will stop. The sacrifices are in vain. The priests have no joy in God, and God no longer has pleasure in them, and will not accept offerings from them. There are two applications of this today.

- i. Some people claim to be believers, and may act like it for a time, but they were never real. They are the people Jesus speaks about in Matthew 7:21-23, who say, *"Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in your name?"*, but His final response is, *"I never knew you."* Not every person who claims to be a Christian has truly accepted Him as Saviour.
- ii. Sometimes a church or an individual (even a true believer) can get so far away from their Lord, that their sacrifices are not pleasing to Him, and He takes no pleasure in their actions. To such, the call is to repent and to return, to a Lord who stands ready to forgive, and to accept, and to love unreservedly.

#### **What is the answer?**

So much for the diagnosis: what about the cure? We, like the hearers of Peter's sermon in Acts 2, say, *"Men and brethren, what shall we do?"*, Acts 2:37b. The reading for today includes two direct commandments:

## The two commands

### i. "Entreat God's favour" (Malachi 1:9)

This commandment occurs in Malachi 1:9. *"But now entreat God's favour, that He may be gracious to us. While this is being done by your hands, will he accept you favourably?"* Beg for God's favour, or He will never bless you, the priests are told. This command seeks to restore the hierarchy of the broken relationships we considered earlier. The relationships of father to son and master to servant, are not symmetrical; they imply one party being superior to the other. The priests had flipped the relationship around. You can't despise somebody without feeling you are looking down on them! They needed to remember the subordinate position they had to God, and approach Him as one that comes to beg a favour of a superior. If they did that, God would be gracious. He never rubs our noses in our failures when we return to Him after acknowledging our mistakes. God is always gracious to those who return to Him. But if they continued stubbornly on their existing course they could be sure God would not accept them favourably.

### ii. "Give glory to My name" (Malachi 2:2)

The second commandment is tucked away in Malachi 2:1-2, *"And now, O priests, this commandment is for you. If you will not hear, and if you will not take it to heart, to give glory to My name," says the LORD of hosts. 'I will send a curse upon you and I will curse your blessings. Yes, I have cursed them already, because you do not take it to heart.'*" (Malachi 2:1-2). This commandment requests a 180 degree about turn in attitude. They were despising God's name, and they are commanded instead to give glory to that name. Just as conversion is an about face of turning towards God, so God sometimes has to call us to turn right round when we are looking away from Him.

## Conclusion

Prayer:

*Loving Father, we confess that sometimes we get as far away from You as the priests did in the time of Malachi. Never stop calling us to return. We thank You that You are endlessly gracious with us when we respond to Your calls. Amen.*

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