

**Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> October 2021**  
**Malachi 2:1-9**  
**Rev.Scott Burton**  
**Brightons Parish Church**

Let us take a moment to pray before we think about God's word. Let us pray.

Holy Spirit, please come among us and soften our hearts to the word of God.

Holy Spirit, please give to us wisdom and revelation.

Holy Spirit, be present here amongst us with power and deep conviction, for we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Across the centuries, the church has had to make decisions that have been uncomfortable and sometimes which stood against theology or practice that had become popular. So, for example, in the fourth century when those people were deciding about what material to include in the Bible, they decided not to include the Gospel of Thomas. You can check the index if you like, it's not there, you didn't miss it, it wasn't included. We must assume that because there are copies available still even to see nowadays, we must assume that it had a measure of popularity, that it made the rounds, it was available, maybe people even knew what his content was, never mind that it existed. But those who compiled the Bible decided not to include the Gospel of Thomas because it taught things about Jesus which were contrary to the teaching passed on by the Apostles the church, made a choice, made a choice to follow what God had revealed to follow God's way rather than these other writings and it did that so as to safeguard its life and its purpose because those other writings would have taken the church down a unhealthy route, it wrote contrary to God's teaching, and I would think that by rejecting those other sources they made some people uncomfortable and those decisions might well have been unpopular in their day.

I say this by way of introduction because this coming Tuesday the Presbytery of Falkirk will be meeting as scheduled and the ministers and elders who make up the Presbytery will talk about two important issues. Firstly, a document that would allow ministers to conduct same-sex marriages and secondly, how to go about forming a new mission plan, and a mission plan basically says which buildings are we keeping, which congregations are we keeping, and which congregations are we closing. And, to my mind, we partly have to deal with the second, the issue of decline, because of matters like the first, and to help extend my thinking on that let's turn to today's passage.

We've just begun the series in Malachi and we know from the previous two weeks that the Lord is sending Malachi to speak to a people He loves, a people He loves so deeply and thoroughly and yet this people they question His love and in questioning His love they have spiraled down into a way of life where they are engaged in practices that are far removed from the ideal set out by God. And so, today's passage takes us to another one of those areas of life that has gone wrong, and it's specifically addressed to the Priests. The Lord focuses upon them. So, what's the issue with them?

Well, the Lord says this to them 'Now you priests, this warning is for you. If you do not listen and if you do not resolve to honor My Name, you have turned from the way and by your teaching have caused many to stumble. You have not followed My ways but have shown partiality in matters of the law.' The heart of this portion of Malachi's

prophecy is a charge against the priests, that they have given way to popularity rather than seeking to honor the Lord above all. We're told at the end there that they've shown 'partiality in matters of the law.' They've shown favoritism, they've tried to carry some favor with the people by letting God's ways, letting God's law slide. We see here that they've courted popularity rather than resolving to honor the Lord above all and, in doing that, they've not only turned from the Lord's ways, they've caused others to turn from the Lord's ways as well, they've caused others to stumble, which is a way of saying, they've caused others to sin.

Now, maybe you're thinking 'Well Scott, it's addressed to the priests so surely this is aimed at the elders and ministers of today's church?' and the elders amongst us might be feeling a bit uncomfortable right now, and I can see why you might think that. You know the Church of Scotland, The General Assembly and the Presbyteries are made up of ministers and elders and their leadership does have an impact on local congregations, but let's also remember what we read in the New Testament where Peter says 'but you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, the holy, God's special possession.' and the you hear that Peter is addressed to a vast group of people across a vast area of the known world in his day, and so Peter's saying that every Christian is now a priest in the Kingdom of God. There's no distinction between individuals like there was in the Old Testament, we are all a royal priesthood and so, when we hear these words of Malachi, they're relevant for all of us. We're all to honor God above everything else. We're all to honor God above popularity and when we make decisions it is God we are to honor rather than doing maybe what's popular or comfortable.

But maybe you might be wondering 'Well Scott, why should I bother to honor God? Why should we honor God?' Well, we could go back to the previous chapter where in those two weeks we thought about the love of God and we thought about the greatness of God. Those are reasons to honor God, but our passage gives us some other reasons to honor God, and to lead us into those other reasons it begins by talking of the discipline of God.

We read earlier '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. Because of you I will rebuke your, I will smear on your faces the dung from your festival sacrifices and you will be carried off with it.' Hard words! Hard words to hear hard words to explain. There's part of me thinking 'Why did I pick this book at times?' and that's very honest. They're meant to be startling words. They are meant to make the original people very uncomfortable because, let's remember, this is a people who have grown cold and hard towards God and the priests in particular have grown in pride and self-sufficiency such that it's led them into wickedness, and so, God uses a range of language and warnings to break through to His people and to break through to His priests in this passage because sometimes only such language, only such a denunciation, will pierce our hard hearts, our sinful hearts.

And so, God begins by saying He is sending a curse but in the original Hebrew the wording here is actually the curse and if you look at most other English translations it

more accurately shows that, the curse. Because when you and I think about a curse we often think about witches and such like - don't we, think about Harry Potter and bits and pieces but God when He's speaking here is not speaking of a curse in that sense, He's not speaking of a bad spell, it's not something evil done to another, it's not done for impure motives because when God entered into a covenant relationship with His people, a covenant that was akin to a marriage relationship. He wrote out both the good that they would receive when they obeyed Him, as well as the discipline they would receive when they disobeyed Him and the people said 'Yes, we accept these terms.'

Now God on the discipline side of things has several layers and so he worked up the layers depending on what they did. He didn't start right at the top because He's not capricious. He's not vengeful, and this is the people He loves but He calls His people to a certain way of life. He calls them to be holy as He is holy and so when they wander from His ways, He promises to discipline them, to bring them back into His way and He does it for good reasons which we will come to. So this curse that He's talking about here it's not a spell, it's not something done in vengeance, it's not done with bad intent, it's about Godly discipline and so when He says 'I will curse your blessings' this probably means and it's probably in reference to the food the priests received. Because let's remember the priests did not have a land of their own, they did not have a means of farming or having produce, and so, because the Lord was their portion, and so what happened is, part of the sacrifice was given to the priests so that they would have food provided for them, and the rest would be used as a sacrifice to the Lord. And as last week's passage reminded us, the priests were saying to the people 'It's okay to give substandard offerings' and that would then have an impact on the priests because if they're receiving substandard offerings then in their cupboard is going to be substandard, there's going to be less and it's not going to be as good food. There's not going to be as bountiful provision in their cupboards and that's simply how God is going to curse their blessings. He doesn't have to do anything else/ It doesn't cast a spell or whatever else. He just allows their poor choices to impact their life and their lives will be all the poorer for their choices and that's how God is going to discipline them. Likewise when He says here that He's going to 'rebuke your descendants' it's about discipline because God is wanting to clean up the worship of His people and so rebuking has descent, their descendants is a way of God saying He's not going to allow these priests and the generations after them to continue serving Him as priests. He's going to sweep away these evil priests and those that might follow in their footsteps and I'm partly led to that conclusion by what comes next. This bit about 'dung' and the sacrifices.

So, what's that all about? Because it feels pretty hard. And again, context is key here. As we know, the sacrifices were animals. Animals have internal organs. One of those internal organs and part of the thing is going to be a digestive system and so, when an animal is sacrificed, in that digestive system is going to be undigested food and God had said that that part of the sacrifice was not worthy of being given to the Lord and it had to be removed before the sacrifice was given. We might say the offal for shorthand, and so the offal was removed and it was taken outside the camp or the city and it kind of formed a dung heap, and God had said in the Old Testament that anyone who came into contact with that, anyone who would be involved in taking it away, became unclean,

at least for a while, and by being unclean they could not come near to the Lord in the tent of meeting or at the temple. They were barred from that place. Now we might find the language here quite difficult to swallow and so did the people of the day and following descendants. We know this because there's an Aramaic translation of the Old Testament called the Targum and the people who wrote that actually rewrote the wording here to get away with the offensive metaphor. They didn't like it, even centuries after God had said it but let's remember, God's not capricious, He's not vengeful, and so He's using a metaphor here, a very striking metaphor, we must admit, but He's using a metaphor to spell out what is coming their way, to spell out a picture to them and what He's saying is very akin to our modern-day phrase of someone having 'egg on their face'. We know that phrase, someone having egg on their face, they don't literally have egg on their face but it's a way of capturing a meaning. Well what Malachi says, here is a fifth century BC equivalent of our modern day saying. What God is trying to get across is this idea that He views these priests as unholy, as unclean, and so they are going to be barred from the place of worship, they're going to be barred from God's presence and because of that they can't continue as priests at least for a while and by all intents I think God is saying, as long as they don't repent. He's basically going to remove them from office and that too is part of God's discipline, He is going to discipline them. He's going to do that for good reasons to safeguard something.

So, what is God trying to safeguard? Well three things: His person or name; His people; and His purposes. God says in verses two and five that He's going to discipline the people, the priests, because they have not honored His name, and then in verse 5 He says that the good priest, the priest who He admires, is the one who reveres God and stands in awe of God's name.

Now maybe we were wondering 'What's all this about a name? Why is that so important?' Well let's remember that in the scriptures a name is tied to a person's character and reputation, so a priest who doesn't honor God's name is a priest who holds God in contempt, as a priest who belittles God and that's a problem for so many reasons. We've seen some of the reasons in the earlier chapter of Malachi but I think there's another reason that we have to consider.

Only when we honor God rightly do we order our lives rightly. Only when we honor God rightly do we order our lives rightly. And so, we make right choices and I could give you any number of examples but let me pick something that is very much on our radar probably from press and such like. We know that COP26 is coming up, we're having to have such a thing because we have global warming and for decades and centuries human beings have pretty much done what they wanted and abused the planet as they wanted. We've taken it very much for granted but if you go back to Genesis 1 and 2 What does God say to do? Steward the earth, look after it but humanity in general with pretty much, including the church at times, ignored God. We've pretty much said 'We'll do what we want and God you can take a hike.' We have not honor God rightly and so we have not ordered our lives rightly, and we've made some poor choices and we're facing the consequences of that. When we honor God rightly we there are in a better place to order our lives rightly, and from that comes better choices and better living and

God is disciplining His people here so as to safeguard His name so that He's honored properly and part of the reason for that is for our benefit.

The Lord also seeks to discipline His people, to safeguard, to safeguard His people because the priests as we saw have been showing partiality. There's been injustice and so He does it to safeguard His people but He also does it to safeguard His purposes and at first that's not very obvious in the passage but in verse 5 He says that He is entered into a covenant so as to bring life and peace or in the Hebrew life and shalom which we know from week one means life and wholeness and so, partly, God is about protecting His purposes of bringing life and wholeness and that is not only for the people themselves, it's not only for Israel, because we know from chapter 1 verse 2 that Israel, Jacob, has been chosen by God to accomplish something, to bring blessing for the world and we could go back to other chapters like in Genesis chapter 12 where God said to Abraham 'I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.' What they received from the Lord was not just for them, it was meant to flow out to others, to the wider world and so God is seeking to protect the purpose He has for His people, Because, how can His people be a light to the nations when they are rejecting the light He has given through the law? How can they be that light? And so, as to safeguard His purposes, He disciplines His people.

But maybe you're wondering 'Well Scott, this is a nice history lesson. This is nice detail. I'm sure it would be a great lecture at Bible college or something, but really, what does this have to do with today?' Well, we might then ask the question - Does God still discipline today? Does God still discipline today? Does he still seek to safeguard His person, His people and His purposes today? Will he allow our poor choices to impact us today? Might he even seek to remove that which is not honoring of Him in our time?

So, let's turn to the New Testament and in the book of Hebrews we read this 'have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son?' It says my son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline and do not lose heart when He rebukes you because the Lord disciplines the one He loves and He chastens everyone He accepts as His son. There's more verses you can go on to read, just after that little portion, but it gives you a flavor of the passage. God does discipline His people, even today.

So, going back to my introduction and talking about the issues that are coming up at Presbytery this week, on the one hand we have a discussion about a practice that has no biblical support whatsoever, and on the other, we have a discussion about decline. Is it really a coincidence that we're talking about both issues at the same time? Because, let's remember, the Lord has called us to a purpose that is beyond our human capacity to do alone, and those who labor without the Lord labor in vain. We need God's help. But why would ever God bless our labors if we are pursuing ways contrary to His word? and for many years there have been voices saying that the Church of Scotland is declining because of our waywardness from God's word. And so, it does raise the question - Is the decline we are facing partly linked to God's discipline? Is He exercising a form of disciplining us, so as to safeguard His person, His people and His purposes?

Maybe he is allowing our poor choices to impact our communal life as a denomination maybe he is even seeking to remove that which is not honoring of him by allowing things to decline and even to close and that's not easy to hear certainly not easy to say and I'm sure you're just jumping with enthusiasm right now in your seats as well! It's a heavy word, it's a challenging thing to consider and be reminded of, but let's remember, God does it for good reasons. For good reasons. To safeguard us. To lead us into life and peace. And so, maybe as we take a moment just to pause and take a breath, I wonder – Is there in you a desire also to know? 'Well, Scott if that's the case if that's the case, how then do we honor God? How then do we safeguard God's person, God's purposes and God's people? How do we honor? God above popularity?

And Malachi leads us on because he goes on to speak about Levi who honored God in this way. Malachi says 'True instruction was in his mouth Levi's mouth and nothing false was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness and turned many from sin 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, the true priest, the true person who honors God is one whose mouth has within it true instruction or in the Hebrew, true Torah, the words of God, the ways of God. What is more, the true priest, Levi, walks with God, walks with God in peace and uprightness, or we might say, he walks in sync with God, his lifestyle is in sync with God.

So, if we want to be a people who honor God, even above popularity, then it must be seen in both our words and in our deeds. This week as I prepared for today a quote that I'd heard a number of years ago in a song came to mind and it's from an author called Brennan Manning who said 'The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips and walk out the door and deny Him by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable.'

Now you might disagree with the greatest single cause of atheism but let's take stock of these words because we're a church that's declining, let's face up to that, and as such it can be tempting to choose ways that are contrary to God's ways and this isn't just about same-sex marriage, so please don't get fixated on that, we could be talking about care for creation and the issue of global warming, as I've mentioned today, we could talk about care for neighbor and the issues of gender-based violence which too many of us men write off, we could talk about whether we are willing to share our faith like James did or whether we shrink back and we allow fear, we allow the desire to be liked and to be popular to curb what we do and so maybe, we have never shared our faith or not for a number of years. Every one of these examples has a scriptural basis and if it has a scriptural basis it means it's important to God, just as much as the more controversial issues, and if we don't take heed, if we don't learn to engage with them, then we're living contrary to God's ways and so as Manning puts it we would be Christians who acknowledge Jesus with our lips here on a Sunday and we sing some lovely songs 'Oh look at us, we're very religious.' and then we go out there the rest of the week and because we just forget what God says, we deny Him with our lifestyle and the wider world thinks Jesus is not important 'Why should I bother with Jesus? He's just about these Christians are just lip service, and they're just being very religious and they just

write Jesus off.' But the ways of God are for the good of the world, all the ways of God are for the good of the world, and if we, His church, would learn to honor God more rightly and so order our lives more rightly, then the wider world might be taking a bit more notice of the church, they might think 'Well, there's actually something in this Christian faith. There's actually something about Jesus which I need to find out about.' And so, we don't need to resort to being popular or give ground to popular opinion to see the direction of the church change, we just need to honor God.

So, you're probably grateful you're not involved in Presbytery conversations this Tuesday night, and that you don't have to be there for that or say anything, but how is God calling you to honor Him in your life this week? Where are you to honor Him? What have you to stop doing? What have you to start doing? Is there an apology you need to give to someone? Is there a cause you need to find out more about or support or volunteer? In the week ahead, how are you going to honor God such that those around you see that the ways of God are for the good of the world and that following Jesus is more than mere lip service to you? How are you called to honor God this week?

Because I pray that we would take these words to heart, that we would resolve to honor the Lord, walking in His ways and be a people who safeguard His person, His people and His purposes. May it be so. Amen.