

Holiness Stymied

2:5-9

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“My covenant with him was one of life and peace, and I gave them to him as an object of reverence; so he revered Me, and stood in awe of My name. True instruction was in his mouth, and unrighteousness was not found on his lips; he walked with Me in peace and uprightness, and he turned many back from iniquity. For the lips of a priest should preserve knowledge, and men should seek instruction from his mouth; for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts. But as for you, you have turned aside from the way; you have caused many to stumble by the instruction; you have corrupted the covenant of Levi,” says the Lord of hosts. ‘So I also have made you despised and abased before all the people, just as you are not keeping My ways, but are showing partiality in the instruction’” (2:5-9).

The spring months of 1989 witnessed several tragic train wrecks in Europe. The video reports were vivid in reporting the horrors involved. In almost every incident the determined cause was the failure of a switchman to make the correct change in a train’s course. The tragedies largely occurred because someone failed to behave in a responsible manner! The Christian is like a switchman. If he is responsible, many will arrive safely at the judgment bar; if neglect is shown regarding duties, only disaster and ruin will result. A wrong signal may send hundreds to eternity unprepared!

Another illustration of the critical importance of properly passing along information is

found in the teamwork of those in the relay race. The team which successfully passes the baton wins.

Many teams can have fast sprinters but lose the race because the baton is improperly passed. To prevent this, the coach drills his team on passing the baton with a slap into the partner’s palm. This assures safe transmission. Without careful attention, the baton can be dropped and the race lost!

Malachi 2:5-9 reveals the tragedy of the irresponsible switchman, or the runner who drops the baton. But here the tragedy is spiritual. The context refers to the history of Phinehas (Numbers 25). Phinehas (Levi) was the “ideal” servant of God. Through him, God’s holiness was revealed (2:6, 7). Those who looked at Phinehas were encouraged to live holy lives. In him they saw one who consistently practiced his covenant with God—“reverence.” He demonstrated devout faith—“walked.” He was incorruptible in doctrine—“true instruction.” And, he was successful in spiritual labors—“turned many.”

Somewhere in Israelite history the signals were crossed and the baton was dropped. The holiness of Phinehas was forgotten. His place was taken by those who were foul and corrupt. His successors were negligent—“are not keeping.” They insolently renounced and reversed God’s laws—“turned aside.” They were damning in example—“caused to stumble.” And, they were cursed in labors—“despised.”

The lack of spirituality of Malachi's day was tragic. Its progress was blocked; its evidence was nonexistent. The baton of holiness had been dropped!

We must be on guard so we will not find this same tragedy and ruin in our lives. Our lives can obstruct God's holiness exactly as happened in Malachi's day. New Testament Christianity can be corrupted by the same factors that ruined Israel. Notice the cause of God's holiness being stymied.

THE FACTORS RESPONSIBLE

As Malachi addressed the priests, he bluntly charged them with hindering God's holiness. They were guilty of four charges.

First, the priests had "turned aside" from righteousness (2:8). They had fallen from the high ideal of Phinehas (2:6, 7). They refused to walk with God in righteousness. This is a tragic characteristic found in all who turn from God's holiness. Paul cautioned Timothy about certain brethren who would "turn aside" from God's Word to pursue selfish doctrines (cf. 1 Timothy 4:1; 2 Timothy 4:4). Israel in Malachi's day had forgotten the admonition of Moses, "That he may learn to fear the Lord his God, . . . that his heart may not be lifted up above his countrymen and that he may not turn aside from the commandment. . . ." (Deuteronomy 17:19, 20; cf. 2 Chronicles 25:27).

When we follow selfish ways, we will follow a multitude who have turned from righteousness. They expect to find freedom, but they only find multiplied sorrow (cf. Deuteronomy 30:17, 18; Hebrews 12:25).

When those in the world see a Christian "turn away from" righteousness to follow evil, they become stronger in their blasphemy. When the Christian drops the baton of righteousness, they fail to see God's holiness (cf. Matthew 5:13; 1 Peter 2:11, 12; 2 Peter 2:2).

Second, the priests had corrupted God's Word and caused many to stumble (2:8). Those in chapter 2 assumed that "little" changes in God's Word would not make any "big" differences. They thought that no harm was being done. But they were wrong! Their actions were in direct conflict with those in 2:6. God expected His people to speak "truth," but Israel was pursuing a perverse course of conduct.

Such would bring an angry response (cf. Nehemiah 13:29).

This same factor is evident today. God's commands are clearly set forth so all can teach and exhort (cf. 2 Timothy 4:1, 2). God expects "sound" (healthy) doctrine to be taught. But many can stand charged as those were in 2:8, "You have caused many to stumble by the instruction." This "weakness" resulted because "healthy" instruction was not given.

In our religious world, only a few delight in a gospel message that is uncorrupted by change. Paul said, "The time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires" (2 Timothy 4:3; cf. 1 Timothy 4:1-3). The majority seek a gospel message that is unrestricted (Matthew 7:13). These are devoted to self, and the idea of self-sacrifice is spurned (Matthew 19:22). So they change God's will rather than changing their lives (2 Peter 3:16).

But the saint refuses to compromise God's will. He finds joy in obedience and strength in steadfastness (1 John 5:2, 3).

Third, the priests were inconsistent with Scripture (2:9). Here were those who claimed to be following God's will, yet they heard an amazing remark. Such is similar to the greeting received by those in Matthew 7:21-23: "Depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness." The cause for God's rejection is the same in both texts— inconsistent obedience to God's will!

An inconsistent obedience is a common factor that causes many to hinder God's holiness. Lapidaries tells of the "Chelydonian Stone." This stone would retain its virtue and luster as long as it was enclosed in gold. It is a fit emblem of the hypocrite who is good only as long as he is enclosed in golden prosperity, safety, and fellowship.

Fourth, the priests practiced partiality in teaching Scripture (2:9b). Of all the charges, this is the greatest. Listen to how it stirred God's fierce wrath,

You shall do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor nor defer to the great, but you are to judge your neighbor fairly (Leviticus 19:15).

Now then let the fear of the Lord be upon you; be very careful what you do, for the Lord our God

will have no part in unrighteousness, or partiality, or the taking of a bribe (2 Chronicles 19:7; cf. Micah 3:11).

Many today are like those who accumulated “teachers in accordance to their own desires” (2 Timothy 4:3). When we pervert God’s plain teaching because we do not want “to hurt” another, we hinder God’s holiness. It is tempting to excuse sin in a loved one’s life and strongly condemn the same sin in the life of another, but it is wrong. God is not partial. God’s Word is not partial. And God’s people should never be partial (Acts 10:34).

THE AIM OF PREVENTION

As we consider the failure of those in chapter 2 to uphold God’s truth, let us be warned so we do not follow the same error. Here are some lessons that will prevent us from blocking God’s holiness in our lives.

One, let us understand that each shares a duty and responsibility to guarantee that God’s holiness is evident in our personal affairs.

Two, let us take heed so the baton of New Testament Christianity will not be “dropped” (cf. 2 Timothy 2:2).

Three, let us examine ourselves to make sure we will share God’s rewards for helping holiness be seen in the world. May we reap blessings and not curses for how God’s holiness was affected by our lives.

CONCLUSION

We find a sober charge in 2:5-9: Let all see that God’s holiness is *never* stymied but is always progressing! For this to happen, we must take heed to Malachi’s message.

One young man graduated and went to a big city to work. He had been trained by holy parents. His work associates would often go to a tavern after work and would encourage him to go with them. “I have orders, positive orders, not to go—orders that I dare not disobey,” he told them. His companions were relentless, “Come on! Don’t be a sissy. Come along like a real man!” “No, I can’t break my orders.” “What special orders do you have? Show them to us.” The youth took out a neat little book and read, “Enter not into the path of the wicked, and go not in the way of evil men. Avoid it, pass not by it, turn from it, and pass away!” Then he said,

“Now you can see that my orders forbid my going with you. These are God’s orders, and by His help I mean to keep them!”

Eli had been given a duty by God. Divine promises were offered to the priest if holiness was demonstrated. But Eli “dropped the baton” of God’s holiness. Because of his failure, the blessed rewards were replaced with tragic consequences (cf. 1 Samuel 2:30).

As teachers, we will be accountable for how we passed the gospel to others. Diogenes saw a youth devouring his food greedily. He gave the boy’s tutor a slap on the ear because the teacher was held responsible for properly teaching the student. The boy had not been taught proper manners, and it was the teacher’s fault!

What kind of teacher are you? What kind of “priest” are you? Have you passed the baton of New Testament Christianity onto others in a proper manner? (2 Timothy 2:2).

—John Kachelman

The Preacher’s Attitude (Malachi 2:5)

1. Toward the covenant he preaches—“reverence.”
2. Toward the God he preaches—“reverence.”
3. Toward the authority with which he is called—“awe.”

The Preacher’s Job Description (Malachi 2:6)

1. Speak God’s truth and shun Satan’s error.
2. Show peace and uprightness by association with God.
3. Seek to snatch sinners from Satan’s snare.

Two Groups—Only Two Groups! (Malachi 2:5-9)

On Judgment Day, all will be in one of two groups before God. Each will hear his own judgment upon which eternity depends.

1. Some will hear the blessings of God—“You revered Me and stood in awe of My name”

(2:5, 6).

2. Some will hear the curse of God—"You have turned aside, caused many to stumble, corrupted the covenant, and have not kept My

ways!" (2:8, 9).

3. There will be no middle ground, no "gray" areas, no "toss-ups"! Only two groups will stand! (Joshua 24:15).

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