

Malachi as a Model for Preachers

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Is it right to look at the prophet Malachi as a model for preachers? His name means, "My messenger," and Christian preachers today are also God's messengers. However God has different kinds of messengers, and preachers today do not have the role of Old Testament prophets. So we need to think carefully before treating Malachi as a model preacher.

There are three reasons to follow up this question. The first is that, in the famous words of J. I. Packer, "Scripture is God preaching."¹ This does not mean that every part of Scripture comes in the form of a contemporary sermon, but it does mean that every part of Scripture is a verbal message of God. God has spoken, and the record of his diverse verbal revelation comprises the books of the Bible. God has addressed us by Scripture, and God continues to bring us the same message by the same means. We know the mind of God through the mouth of God in the words of God. There are many literary forms in the Bible, including history, wisdom, prophecy, gospels, and epistles. Prophecy, especially in the form of direct quotation of God's words by the prophet, is in the same form as a sermon. The messenger speaks the message of God to God's people. So there may be some things

we can learn from the Bible as “God preaching.”

The second encouragement to pursue a study of Malachi as a model for preachers is that the Bible includes what we call sermons. Deuteronomy includes sermons that Moses preached to God’s people before they entered the Promised Land. There are sermons in the Gospels and Acts, some preached in synagogues, and others preached in other places. The New Testament book which is most like a sermon is the letter to the Hebrews. It describes itself as “a word of exhortation,” “paraclesis,” and we find the same word “paraclesis” used in Acts of the sermon which Paul preached in the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:15). Hebrews, furthermore, reads as a series of expositions of Old Testament passages, namely a collection of quotations from the Psalms (especially Psalms 2, 95, and, 110), then then Jeremiah 31. Perhaps Hebrews originated from a series of sermons.

The third encouragement to see Malachi as a model for preachers today is Calvin’s observation on the role of prophets in the Old Testament. He sees them as preachers of the Law of Moses, applying an ancient text to their contemporary audience. Calvin traces the ministry of Old Testament prophets to the Law of Moses, “from which they derived their doctrine, like streams from a fountain.” The Law consists chiefly in three parts, according to Calvin: “first the doctrine of life; secondly, threatenings and promises; and thirdly the covenant of grace, which, being founded in Christ, contains within itself all the special promises.” The ministry of the prophets followed this three-fold pattern:

The prophets, therefore, enter more largely into the illustration of the doctrine, and explain more fully what is briefly stated in the Two Tables, and lay down what the Lord chiefly requires from us. Next, the threatenings and promises, which Moses had proclaimed in general terms, are applied by them to their own time and minutely described. Lastly, they express more clearly what Moses says more obscurely about Christ and his grace, and bring forward more copious and more abundant proofs of the free covenant.²

Calvin’s claim is supported in the many places in Malachi in which he tackles issues raised by the Law, as also in these words, “Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel” (Mal 4:4).³

Of course the Law of God, the first five books of the Bible, contains much more than God's laws. We learn that God created the world and humankind. We learn of the fall, as we learn of God's promises to Abram. We see God the deliverer, rescuing his people from Egypt, making a covenant with this people, and coming to live among them. We learn of the sacrifices made in the Tabernacle, and especially of the sacrifices by which sin was atoned. We learn how the holy God made his people to be holy, and called them to holiness, and we learn of God's faithfulness to his people in bringing them to the edge of the Promised Land. The Old Testament word for "the Law," Torah, means "the teaching," and "the Law" is a literary category, which includes wider theology than is found in its specific laws.

As Malachi expounded, taught, and preached the Law of Moses to God's people, so we too expound, teach, and preach the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to God's people today. We can see him as a model of how to preach ancient texts, though of course we preachers do not have the authority or inspiration of Old Testament prophets, and we function in the new covenant, not the old.

So what may we learn from Malachi to benefit and enrich our preaching today? Malachi's preaching focused on six areas:

- God.
- God's covenant love.
- The gap between God's words and the words of the people.
- Atonement and judgment.
- The corporate life of God's people.
- Their words to each other.

God

The first words of the book of Malachi make it clear that the priority of the book is God's word to his people: "A prophecy: The word of the LORD to Israel through Malachi" (1:1).⁴ There is no introductory narrative with information about the historical context, or the identity and background of the prophet. The "word of the LORD" is of primary importance. The words of God are found in forty-six of fifty-five verses in the book. The words of God reveal the mind of God, the thoughts of God, the responses

of God, and the opinion of God. We also learn of the spiritual condition of the people, and we hear their words which express that condition. But the initiative in the conversation is with God. From his first words, “I have loved you” (1:2), God is revealing himself. God’s people, are called Israel (1:1) in this book.⁵ They seem to be ignorant or forgetful of God, and value their own opinions, and the opinions of others in the community. Their greatest challenge is to hear, trust, and obey God. The message is God-centered, not man-centered; theocentric, not anthropocentric. The main issue in the book is the “vertical” relationship of the people with God, not the “horizontal” relationship of the people with each other. It is God-centered, not people centered, and not self-centered.

What a challenge for preachers today, when people want preaching that is practical, easily-understood, and simply implemented. At the same time, what a challenge for God’s people today, when individualism, self-centeredness, and consumerism infect us all. We focus on what we think, what we feel, what we want, what we like and dislike, what we fear, and what we hope for. How painful and frustrating to be stopped in our tracks, interrupted in our social conversation, and to be contradicted by “the word of the Lord” (1:1). When we shape our lives, our families, our work, our friendships, and our participation in our human community by what we want, what a shock to hear what God wants. When we want to express our opinions, speak our mind, declare our likes and dislikes, and tell others what we feel, what a shock when God gets the microphone, expresses his opinion, speaks his mind, declare his likes and dislikes, tells us what he feels, and what we must know and do! Our most important relationship is with God, and this, like all other human relationships, founders when we fail to listen, fail to trust, and fail to respond.

With the words, “I have loved you” (1:2), God takes the initiative and from then on sets the agenda, most often in contradiction to the words of his people. The reply, “How have you loved us” (1:2), reveals the chasm between God and the people he loves. Notice that they do not directly contradict him: instead they ask him to prove it. Rather than trusting God’s words, they prod him to produce evidence. They want to take the dominant role in the relationship, and they want their needs to be met. They could play this game for many generations: “I have loved you,” “How have you loved us?” (1:2). What should their answer be? It should be “We know that you love us, because you have told us that you love us, shown us that you love us: and

we love you with heart, soul and strength.” Or, more simply, “Yes.” For they knew that God loved them, from the book Deuteronomy,

For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession. The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your ancestors that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments (Deut 7:6-9).

There is a world of difference between asking “What do we want?,” “What do I want?” and asking “What does God want?” Congregations today are likely to ask the first two questions, and not the last question. Our greatest sin is always our sin against God, for our first duty is to love God, as we read in Deuteronomy.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength (Deut 6:4-5).

Next, we see that their distrust of God led them to despise God’s name. The priests show contempt for God’s name (Mal 1:6), whereas they should “resolve to honor my name” (2:2) and be like their ancestor Levi, who “revered me and stood in awe of my name” (2:5). And later we see that some of the people responded to Malachi’s words, and “feared the Lord and honoured his name” (3:16), and God promised the sun of righteousness to shine on those “who revere my name” (4:2). To refuse God’s declaration of love is to despise his name, his self-revelation: it is to despise God.

GOD’S COVENANT LOVE

The message of Malachi is based on the covenant love, the promised love, of the Lord God. God himself reveals this covenant love for his people to

Moses in these words:

The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation (Exod 34:6-7).

The prophets have reinforced this message of God's faithful love. So we find these words in Isaiah:

For the LORD comforts his people
and will have compassion on his afflicted ones.
But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me,
the Lord has forgotten me."
"Can a mother forget the baby at her breast
and have no compassion on the child she has borne?
Though she may forget,
I will not forget you!
See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands;
your walls are ever before me (Isa 49:14-16).

In Jeremiah we read God's words to his people: "I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unending kindness" (Jer 31:3).

The generosity and effective power of God's sovereign and grace-filled love is clear if his people compare their situation with that of Edom.

"I have loved you," says the LORD. "But you ask, 'How have you loved us?'"
"Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" declares the LORD. "Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated, and I have turned his hill country into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals."
Edom may say, "Though we have been crushed, we will rebuild the ruins."
But this is what the LORD Almighty says: "They may build, but I will demolish. They will be called the Wicked Land, a people always under the wrath of the LORD. You will see it with your own eyes and say, 'Great is the LORD—even beyond the borders of Israel!'" (Mal 1:2-5).

It is significant that God's people are addressed as "Israel," and that the Lord declares "I have loved Jacob" (1:1, 2). For Jacob was renamed Israel (Gen 32:28): both names refer to the same person.

Esau's descendants were the Edomites, and Jacob's descendants were God's people, whose God was "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."⁶ God is saying to his people, "Edom is where you would be if I had not chosen you and loved you." While Esau and Jacob were the twin sons of Isaac and Rebekah, God chose Jacob, the younger twin and not Esau, the older twin. We find God's words to Rebekah in Genesis:

"Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples from within you will be separated;
one people will be stronger than the other,
and the older will serve the younger" (Gen 25:23).

In the words of Ralph Smith, "When Yahweh says, "I have loved Jacob," he means "I chose Jacob," and when he says "I hated Esau," he means "I did not choose Esau."⁷

Here the message of the Law of Moses is being reinforced and spoken directly to God's people. They are God's covenant people, those he has loved and chosen. They were chosen because they were loved, as we have seen in Deuteronomy 7:7-8. God's relentless love is seen most clearly in contrast to God's relentless judgment, as God's eternal love is seen most clearly in contrast to God's eternal judgment.

In Romans Paul shows the significance of God's choice of Jacob.

Rebekah's children were conceived at the same time by our father Isaac. Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls—she was told, "The older will serve the younger." Just as it is written: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."

What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."

It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God's mercy (Rom 10:10-16).⁸

God's words, "I have loved you" are the foundation of the rest of Malachi's prophecy. If only they knew that God had loved them, then they would not have fallen into their constant sins: failing to respect and honor God (1:6), showing contempt for and profaning God's name (1:7-14), faithlessness (2:10-17), wearing the Lord with their words (2:17), failing to return to the Lord Almighty (3:6-7), and robbing God (3:8). Serious sins cast long shadows, and the sin of failing to trust in God's electing love leads to all kinds of shadows and sins. As I have written elsewhere,

While they were not actually running away from God, and were not worshipping idols, as they had in the past, they seemed to lack the energy to serve God wholeheartedly. They tried to live in neutral territory, neither serving God too enthusiastically nor turning away from God too enthusiastically ... They thought they were in a grey no-man's land ... In fact they were in a vicious circle, a terrifying whirlpool, sinking further and further to destruction ... To deny that God has loved them is to deny God. This contradiction of God lies deep within the heart of the people.⁹

Their refusal to allow God to assure and convince them of his covenant love is their most serious sin, and the source of all their other sins. They will not allow God to convince and assure them of his saving love, and so they distance themselves from all his other words.

THE GAP BETWEEN GOD'S WORDS AND THE WORDS OF THE PEOPLE

Here I want to show you a great strength in Malachi's prophecy, which should also be a great strength in our preaching. Malachi, inspired by the Holy Spirit, shows that he knows the mind of God, and that he knows the mind of the people of Israel. He "exegetes" God, and he "exegetes" the people. See these characteristic contradictions between the words of God and the words of the people.

- "I have loved you," says the LORD. "But you ask, "How have you loved us?" (1:2).
- "It is you priests who show contempt for my name. "But you ask, "How

have we shown contempt for your name?” “By offering defiled food on my altar. “But you ask, “How have we defiled you?” “By saying that the LORD’s table is contemptible (1:6-7).

- You have wearied the LORD with your words. “How have we wearied him?” you ask (2:17).
- Return to me, and I will return to you,” says the LORD Almighty “But you ask, “How are we to return?” “Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me. “But you ask, “How are we robbing you?” (3:7-8).
- “You have spoken arrogantly against me,” says the LORD. “Yet you ask, “What have we said against you?” (3:13). “You have spoken arrogantly against me,” says the LORD. “Yet you ask, “What have we said against you?” “You have said, “It is futile to serve God. What do we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the LORD Almighty? But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly evildoers prosper, and even when they put God to the test, they get away with it” (3:13-15).

Malachi knows the words of God and he knows the words of the community. He contrasts them showing that the people contradict God. This contradiction is not as vivid as an outright denial, but it is equally damaging. It is a failure and refusal to trust, and a practice of doubting God’s words by asking him to provide them with convincing evidence. The people act as if they are the master, and God is their servant. They may delay their positive response to God by asking delaying questions forever.

In my younger years as a preacher, I used to spend all my preparation time on the passage of Scripture, delighting in the discovery of the depths of the text. I would not spend any time thinking about the people who were to hear the sermon. These sermons would end with the words, “May God show us how to put this into practice in our lives.” This was code for, “I have no idea why this part of the Bible is important, nor have I thought about its implications and application!” I now discipline myself to spend half my preparation time on the passage of Scripture, and half my time praying for the people who will hear the sermon, and trying to work out what they will find hard to understand in the Scripture passage, what they need to know to make sense of it, what they will welcome, what they will object to, and how I can get them to receive God’s words with faith, obedience, and joy.¹⁰

Malachi seems to have listened to God's people with as much attention as he listened to God. And he seems to be painfully aware of the gap between the mind, thoughts and words of God, and the mind, thoughts and words of God's people.¹¹

My favorite example of a preacher doing this is Calvin on Ephesians 5:22-26 expounding the words, "Wives be subject to your husbands," "Husbands love your wives." After explaining what Paul meant, he then articulates what people listening may be thinking.

The husband may plead, I have a dreadful and stubborn wife; or else she is proud, or has a wicked head, or else is too talkative. Again, perhaps another is a drunkard, another is idle, and another of some other disposition ... The wife also for her part will not be without stock of excuses. So often her husband may be irritable and quarrelsome, with little regard for what God has called them to. Some are niggardly and frequenters of taverns, or else act like spendthrifts in gaming and other dissolute practices ... But when we come to God, we are bound to hand down our heads, for it will profit use nothing to be insolent towards him.¹²

In Richard Lints' words, we preachers must "lay bare the fundamental assumptions of a culture,"¹³ as well as lay bare the pure words of God. This is just what Malachi is doing so starkly and so powerfully.

Preachers who know their people can do this. According to Calvin, this is one of the reasons God gives preachers to congregations.

God did not content himself to put forth the Holy Scripture that every man might study it, but he devised of his infinite goodness a second means to instruct us; he would have the doctrine that is therein contained preached and expounded to us. And for this end and purpose he has appointed shepherds in his church which have the office and charge of teaching. This aid God thought good to add because of our slowness. It was already very much that he had given us his word and caused it to be written that every one of us might read it and learn it. God showed himself herein very liberal toward us. But when we see he deals with us after our weakness and chews our morsels for us that we might digest them the better, in that he feeds us as little children, we shall never be able to excuse ourselves, unless we profit in his school.¹⁴

An obvious example of the need for this pastoral awareness comes when we preach on any Bible passage about sickness and healing. We need to clarify and preach what the particular message of the text. We, however, should be keenly aware of various views among our people when we do so. Some would never ask God to heal them, but trust in medical treatment and medicines. Some regard every illness as a spiritual matter, and so avoid medical treatment and tackle it with repentance and faith. Some think that illness is always the result of their own personal sin, so will focus their energy on finding the relevant sin and repenting of it. We need to address these issues, because, although they may not exactly match the message of the text, they are present in the community, and also present elsewhere in the Bible. We must know our hearers as well as we know our Bible, as Malachi knew the thoughts and words of his hearers as well as he knew the thoughts and words of God.

ATONEMENT AND JUDGMENT

The people will not allow God to convince and assure them of his saving love, and this leads them to distance themselves from all his other words. It also leads the priests and the people to show their contempt for God by offering defective sacrifices. Malachi 1:6-2:9 is addressed to the priests, and 1:6-14 focuses on the sacrifices they offer. Sloppy sacrifices mean spiritual sickness. The people brought blind, lame, and diseased animals, and the priests accepted them and offered them. What a traitorous travesty of true worship! For they could read in the Law of Moses this warning:

Do not bring anything with a defect, because it will not be accepted on your behalf ... Do not offer to the LORD the blind, the injured or the maimed, or anything with warts or festering or running sores. Do not place any of these on the altar as a food offering presented to the LORD (Lev 22:20, 22).

Some sacrifices were offered to atone for sins: these were the burnt offering, the sin offering, and the guilt offering (Lev 1:1-17, 4:1-35, 5:14-6:7). What bizarre behavior to offer a sacrifice for the atonement of your sin, but to offer a defective sacrifice, a sick sacrifice! It was the extraordinary sin of despising the means of atonement and forgiveness provided by God. They

were not only despising God, but also despising the means of atonement and forgiveness that he had provided.

We can see the seriousness of this sin if we think of the sacrifice of Christ, which was foreshadowed in the very sacrifices God's people were offering so shoddily in Malachi's day.

Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, and since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool. For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy (Heb 10:11-14).

And it is through the blood of this sacrifice that we can enter the presence of God.

Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water (Heb 10:19-22).

What severe judgment is pronounced on those who set aside, deny, reject or despise Christ's atoning sacrifice! For that person has "trampled the Son of God underfoot . . . treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified them, and . . . insulted the Spirit of grace" (Heb 10:29).

Other sacrifices in the Temple were offered as an expression of love and fellowship with God, such as the grain offering and fellowship offering (Leviticus 2-3). Again how bizarre to go to the trouble of offering one of these sacrifices and not mean it! Sick sacrifices are signs of sick people, people and priests who show their contempt for God at the very moment when they come into his temple to sacrifice to him. It is bad to be a hypocrite to show off to others: it is futile to be a hypocrite when approaching God. No wonder God says, "Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar!" (2:10). God's people

have regressed to Isaiah 1:12: “who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts?”

Atonement and judgment fit together. If there is no judgment, then there is no need for atonement: if there is no atonement then we are all condemned. God’s people in Malachi’s day are in dire straits, for they despise God’s atonement and ignore God’s judgment. Their attitude to God’s judgment is perilous, and wearies God.

You have wearied the LORD with your words. “How have we wearied him?” you ask. By saying, “All who do evil are good in the eyes of the LORD, and he is pleased with them” or “Where is the God of justice?” (2:17).

And they have spoken arrogantly against him.

“You have spoken arrogantly against me,” says the LORD. “Yet you ask, “What have we said against you?” “You have said, “It is futile to serve God. What do we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the LORD Almighty? But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly evildoers prosper, and even when they put God to the test, they get away with it”” (3:13-15).

If they knew God’s covenant love they would know that he delayed his judgment to give them time and opportunity to repent, as he was doing through the words he gave Malachi for his people.

What, then, will happen if God’s people refuse his words of love and his warnings of judgment?

While God will save those who fear him and honor his name (3:16-17), his judgment is sure. Its delay is not a sign of his weakness, but of his mercy. God’s judgment is as certain as his love. And after the coming of the messenger, after the Lord himself comes to the temple, and after the coming of Elijah (3:1-5, 4:5-6), God warns: “I will come and strike the land with total destruction,” or more literally, “with the curse” (4:6). This is the covenant curse described in Deuteronomy 27-28. Malachi is applying the Law.

Yet, as we know, when God’s judgment was poured out, and he did strike the land with a curse, he also sent his Son to bear that curse.

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole." He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit (Gal 3:13-14).

For, as Peter assures us,

"He himself bore our sins" in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; "by his wounds you have been healed" (1 Pet 2:24).

May we know God's love for us in the atoning death of his Son. For, in Paul's words, "if anyone does not love the Lord, let that person be cursed" (1 Cor 16:22).

THE CORPORATE LIFE OF GOD'S PEOPLE

For the first fifteen years of my ministry I did what I had heard other preachers do, and that was to preach to individuals in the congregation. This aim was reflected in my prayers before I preached. I always prayed that God would bring his words home to many, and that each person would respond with faith and obedience.

Then I suddenly realized that most of the Bible is not addresses to individuals but to the people God. The Bible addressed the corporate life, the body life of the people of God. The Bible addressed their shared assumptions, their shared experience, their shared sins, their structural sins, and their shared life of trust and obedience. The Law and the prophets clearly addressed God's people in the Old Testament, and most of the letters in the New Testament are addressed to churches, not individuals: "To the church of the Thessalonians" (1 Thess 1:1). And even those letters addressed to individuals such as the letters to Timothy, Titus and Philemon, were also intended to be read and heard by churches.¹⁵

We are more likely to make the mistake of taking what God says to his people and applying to individuals instead because in the English language we have only one word, "you," which can refer to an individual and also to many people. We are likely to read an individual "you" instead of a plural

“you” when we are reading the Bible on our own, and because of the individualism of our society and of our Christianity. We even make this mistake in Revelation 2-3, where it is very clear that the Lord Jesus is addressing churches, not individuals, even in Revelation 3:20!

There are prophetic words to individuals, such as Nathan’s rebuke of king David in 1 Samuel 12:1-15. However mostly the prophets, from Moses on, address the people of God, and, on some occasions, other nations. This is what we see in Malachi. He is not addressing individuals, but the whole community of God’s people, “Israel” (1:1). He does speak a particular word to the priests (1:6-2:9), but it is to the priests as a group, not to individual priests.

It is easy to imagine how an individual responds to the word of God. How do groups of people respond? The answer is that when a group responds, individuals respond not only in terms of their individual lives, but also in terms of their participation in their community, and their contribution to the standard and style of the life of the community. And when a group responds, the leaders of the group play a key role in the response. If they do not lead in responding to the word of God themselves and also encouraging the community to respond as a whole, then it will be hard for the community to respond. This, no doubt, is why Malachi has a particular message for the priests, as the teachers of the Law of Moses, and leaders of the community.

When God speaks to a group, as in Malachi, it increases individual responsibility. So, for example, God says,

“Return to me, and I will return to you,” says the LORD Almighty. “But you ask, “How are we to return?” “Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me.” “But you ask, “How are we robbing you?” “In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse—your whole nation—because you are robbing me” (3:7-9).

What, then, is the responsibility of the individual Israelite? Of course that person must ensure that his own tithes and offerings are complete and up to date. But that is not enough. That person must exhort and urge others to do the same. That person must make sure that robbing God is not a joking matter among friends, and that the matter is taken seriously by the leaders of the community. That person will no doubt pray fervently that everyone in the community will stop robbing God, and that robbing God will be treated as a serious sin by the whole community. He will work to ensure that

people give cheerfully and joyfully, not grudgingly and resentfully, so that the shared values of the community make everyone to know that robbing God must stop, and that “cheerful giving” is the norm, not an exception.¹⁶

And the leaders of the community, the priests in this case, must repent of their version of robbing God, offering polluted food on God’s altar (1:6-8).

If we have a shared culture of prayerlessness in our church, think of the results. Prayerful people will get no encouragement to pray and may give up. Young people and new converts will get the impression that Christianity is prayerless, and accept that as the norm. Shared sins damage a community, and shared sins damage individuals. Church communities are especially blind to their shared sins: sin blinds us corporately as well as individually. And sin binds communities together, for mutual protection. Sin blinds and binds communities! My experience is that churches do not mind it when I tackle individual sins, but get very cross when I tackle corporate, shared sins!

Conversely churches can have shared strengths. The churches of Macedonia had the shared value of great generosity even in the midst of poverty (2 Cor 8:1-4). The church of the Thessalonians suffered for Christ, following the example of the churches of Judea (1 Thess 2:14-16). They also loved their fellow-believers throughout Macedonia (1 Thess 4:9-10). The Lord Jesus commends both the church in Smyrna and the church Philadelphia in Revelation 2:8-11, 3:7-13. He finds no fault in them, whereas he does find fault with the other five churches. Shared strengths in a church are very attractive, and also strengthen every believer in that church to live the same way.

In Malachi’s day, the situation was very different. God’s people as a whole were complicit in many sins, and their shared sins bound them together. At every point they contradicted God’s words, and refused to acknowledge their sins. Like the churches of Ephesus, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, and Laodicea they either committed sins or tolerated them (Rev 2:1-7, 12-29, 3:1-6, 14-22).

It seems that the people of God as a whole did not respond to the prophecy of Malachi. Some did respond, and God would eventually make plain the distinction between those who did and those who did not.

Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those

who feared the LORD and honored his name. “On the day when I act,” says the LORD Almighty, “they will be my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as a father has compassion and spares his son who serves him. And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not (3:16-18).

It looks like the creation of a true church within a larger church, *ecclesiola in ecclesia*, a remnant of God’s people who feared the Lord. Malachi’s prophecy condemned the corporate sin of God’s people, created and sustained those who received it, and made plain the difference “between righteous and the wicked, those who serve God and those who do not.”

If we individualize the message of Malachi, we will miss its meaning. For Malachi speaks against the common practices of the community, against its shared values, against the structure of its shared attitude to God. It was not enough for individuals in Malachi’s day to respond to his words: the whole people of God must repent and return to God. So it is today.

THEIR WORDS TO EACH OTHER

Moses told God’s people in Deuteronomy that they should love the Lord their God by keeping his words. To keep God’s words is to preserve them in the living consciousness of the community, and to ensure that the community obeys them.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates (Deut 6:4-9).

The words are to be recited and talked about, remembered and discussed. And as they are to shape action and thought (“hand” and “forehead”), so they are to shape the life of the family (“the doorposts of your house”) and the life of the community (“your gates” [of the city]). The covenant words are

to be remembered and discussed within families and within the community.

Within the Old Testament people of God, the priests had the duty of teaching the Law of Moses, and discussing its implementation (2:5-9, and Deut 33:9b-10, Jer 18:18, Hag 2:10-13, Ezra 7, Neh 8). The prophets were preachers of the Law and its covenant, as we have seen. In Malachi's day, if the priests had been teaching the Law of Moses, and if the people had responded, there might have been no need for the prophet.

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 (2:7).

And the people also had the duty of encouraging each other in keeping the covenant by reciting the words of the covenant, and talking about them with others, as we have found in Deuteronomy.

Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise (Deut 6:7).

The New Testament equivalent of this is the mutual ministry of teaching, admonishing and encouraging each other:

- Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God (Col 3:16).
- And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching (Heb 10:24-25).
- Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God (1 Pet 4:10-11).

Mutual teaching, encouragement, and admonition among God's people is the expected norm in Old and New Testament alike.

How painful then to read the dreadful words the people of God are saying to each other in Malachi's day:

- "I have loved you," says the LORD. "But you ask, 'How have you loved us?'" (1:2).
- "It is you priests who show contempt for my name." "But you ask, 'How have we shown contempt for your name?'" "By offering defiled food on my altar." "But you ask, 'How have we defiled you?'" "By saying that the LORD's table is contemptible" (1:6-7).
- You have wearied the LORD with your words. "How have we wearied him?" you ask. By saying, "All who do evil are good in the eyes of the LORD, and he is pleased with them" or "Where is the God of justice?" (2:17).
- "Return to me, and I will return to you," says the LORD Almighty "But you ask, 'How are we to return?'" "Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me. But you ask, 'How are we robbing you?'" (3:7-8).
- "You have spoken arrogantly against me," says the LORD. "Yet you ask, 'What have we said against you?'" "You have said, 'It is futile to serve God. What do we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the LORD Almighty? 15 But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly evildoers prosper, and even when they put God to the test, they get away with it" (3:13-14).

Here are four sins:

- They fail to encourage each other to trust in God and obey him.
- They spread distrust, discontentment and bitterness against God.
- They complain about God, rather than speaking to God.
- They debase God's people as a whole by speaking these words, hearing these words without refuting them, thinking these words, and repeating these words to others.

This sounds like the warning we read in Psalm 1.

Blessed is the one
who does not walk in step with the wicked
or stand in the way that sinners take
or sit in the company of mockers,
but whose delight is in the law of the LORD,
and who meditates on his law day and night (Ps 1:1-2).

Would that they had heeded those words! And would that they had heeded the words of the Lord God through the mouth of Malachi the prophet.

The contrast is made clear by the good news of Malachi 3:16: “Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard.”

Notice those who feared the LORD “talked with each other,” that is, they counteracted the cancerous common talk of others, which spread despair, discontent and disobedience. They encouraged and taught and exhorted each other, and as the LORD knew the destructive words spoken by others, so the LORD listened and heard their words of mutual encouragement. And see that the LORD honored them by including them in his book of remembrance. “A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honored his name” (3:16). And he claimed them as his own treasured possession, and promised his compassionate deliverance on the Day of Judgment:

“On the day when I act,” says the LORD Almighty, “they will be my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as a father has compassion and spares his son who serves him. And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not” (3:17-18).

We are profoundly influenced by our fellow believers. By the words they speak to us, they either encourage or discourage us, either warm our faith or dampen it down, either challenge us to trust God, or drive us to doubt and distrust. And we influence our fellow believers, either encouraging or discouraging them in their life with God. None of us is free from the powerful influence of the church we belong to. We are either being drawn to God, or dragged away from him, by the words of our brothers and sisters.

God through Malachi targets not the thoughts of his people, but their

words, and then their actions. Of course their thoughts will shape their words and actions, but it is their words which are corroding others, and choking trust and obedience among God's people as a whole.

And from a New Testament perspective, believers who complain about God, and speak against him to their fellow-Christians, and most unlikely to be commending God to unbelievers.

We do not know if we should call Malachi a successful prophet. It does not seem that his preaching resulted in complete and comprehensive repentance by God's people. We do not read of it. But some heard, and some responded, feared the LORD and spoke with each other. How God must have loved those words of mutual encouragement! Those people were indeed his "treasured possession" (3:17), even if other Israelites were not.¹⁷

The shared values of a church are promoted, received and reinforced by what people do and say. What we do and say to each other is often more powerful than what the minister says and does.

By what we say to each other, we can either draw others to God, or drag them away from God. And if we do not speak of God at all in our conversations, if we fail to "teach and admonish one another" (Col 3:16), then we will fail to draw our fellow-believers to God. The Christian life is not designed to be lived alone in isolation from other believers, though God can sustain those who are forced to live this way. We need the verbal encouragement, admonition and teaching of our fellow believers. We see in Malachi how to get it wrong. We see in Colossians 3:16 how to get it right: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom". How sad when churches provide friendships, and not real fellowship, in which we all give and receive teaching and admonition.

CONCLUSION

If we are preaching the book of Malachi, our preaching will need to focus on God, God's covenant love, the gap between God's words and his people's word, atonement and judgment, the corporate life of God's people, and their words to each other. Preaching is well described as "a projection of the eloquence of Scripture,"¹⁸ and we should project the eloquence of Malachi when we preach this book.

We can learn from the prophet Malachi how to identify and preach these

themes. These lessons should also enrich our preaching of other books of the Bible.

Furthermore, I hope this chapter will also alert us to learn pastoral and preaching wisdom from other Bible books as well. I have learnt much pastoral and preaching wisdom from the Bible, especially Deuteronomy, Proverbs, Jeremiah, Malachi, John, Colossians, Hebrews, James, and Revelation. I urge you to do the same, reading Malachi and other Bible books as models of ministry to gain rich wisdom for our preaching and pastoral ministries!

May God in his mercy continue to train us in godliness and good ministry through his word.

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- ¹ J. I. Packer, *God Has Spoken* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979), 97.
 - ² John Calvin, *Commentary on Isaiah 1-32* (trans. William Pringle; Calvin Translation Society; Vol. 7, 1843; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1981), vol 1, xxvi.
 - ³ Other references to the Law of Moses in Malachi include his focus on God's covenant love and covenant curse from Deuteronomy, marriage from Genesis and Deuteronomy, and priests, their sacrifices and their teaching, from Deuteronomy and Leviticus.
 - ⁴ All Bible quotations are from NIV 2011.
 - ⁵ The name "Israel" was often used of the Northern kingdom, but is here used of God's people, from both the Northern and Southern Kingdom. Its use is significant, as we will see in 1:2.
 - ⁶ See Exod 3:6, Matt 32:22.
 - ⁷ Ralph L. Smith, *Micah-Malachi* (Word Biblical Commentary 32; Waco, TX: Word Books, 1984), 305.
 - ⁸ The quotations are Genesis 25:23, Malachi 1:1-2, and Exodus 33:19.
 - ⁹ Peter Adam, *The Message of Malachi* (The Bible Speaks Today; Nottingham: IVP, 2013), 15, 16, 35.
 - ¹⁰ Paul uses a similar method in Romans, when he anticipates, articulates and answers questions prompted by his presentation of the gospel.
 - ¹¹ See Isaiah 55:8-13.
 - ¹² John Calvin, *Sermons on The Epistle to the Ephesians* (Edinburgh; Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1973), 566.
 - ¹³ Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 119.
 - ¹⁴ John Calvin, *Sermons on Timothy and Titus* (trans. L. T., London, 1579; facs. reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1983), 945.
 - ¹⁵ See 1 Tim 6:21, 2 Tim 4:22, Tit 3:15, and Philemon 2.
 - ¹⁶ 2 Cor 9:7.
 - ¹⁷ Exod 19:5.
 - ¹⁸ Chamberlin describes John Donne's preaching as "a projection of the eloquence of Scripture," John S. Chamberlin, *Increase and Multiply: Arts-of-Discourse Procedure in the Preaching of Donne* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976), 28.