

Malachi 2:1-9 — What Are The Blessings and Dangers of Spiritual Leadership?

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Who was your favorite school teacher? For me, it was my French teacher. She was a very eccentric person and wore far too much makeup. Her chalkboard was always dusty so her hands were always dusty. I don't know if she did it on purpose or by accident but she had a habit of putting her chalky fingers on her face which left chalk handprints on her cheeks and forehead. She kept teaching with a straight face as if nothing was wrong. I had a hard time keeping a straight face when she was teaching. While she was a funny teacher, she was also a demanding teacher. I can still hear her saying, "I am not here to teach you French. I am teaching you good work and study habits." She did a good job.

While we remember good teachers, we also remember teachers that were less than stellar. For me, that was my probably my junior high English teacher. Those afternoon classes never much sense to me. If any of you know me, you know I have spent the rest of my life unlearning some of the bad English habits I picked up in those early years. Do you have teachers that didn't teach well when you were young so you need to unlearn or relearn what they taught?

Teachers leave a powerful impact on us, either positively or negatively. Their influence will either help you for years to come or hamstring you as you face the future. The Bible has a lot to say about being discerning when it comes to the teachers we allow to influence our lives. This is especially true today because of the Internet. We have access to more teachers than at any other time in the history of the world. We need to be discerning about the podcasts we

follow. We need to be careful about the web sites we read and the YouTube videos we play simply because we need to be careful who we have as teachers. This morning we are going to study teachers and learn how to tell a good one from a bad one.

We are in a series on the book of Malachi. This book was written around 435 B.C. by the prophet Malachi to God's people after they returned from exile in Babylon. Things were not going well. The temple was rebuilt. The Old Testament sacrifices were being offered but things were not well in the community. They struggled with drought and poor crops. Nations around them kept them living in fear. They questioned God's love for them. In the first week of our study, we saw how God assured them of his love. God told them he loves them so much that his love for the rest of the world is like hatred in comparison to his love for them. Last week we learned the real question is not God's love for them but their love for God.

Last week we saw this half-hearted love the people have for God began in the priesthood — the pastors of their time. The priests were not honoring God in the sacrifices they offered. They gave God their garbage instead of the best. They also didn't honor God with their attitudes. Instead of seeing it as a privilege to serve God, they saw it as a burden. They snorted and complained about their work. God was not happy.

This morning, as we continue in Malachi, the book moves from talking about the corruption of the sacrifices the priests offered to the corruption of the priest's teaching. We are going to learn about good teachers.

These verses break into three headings: 1) How does God feel about bad spiritual leaders? 2) What does a good spiritual leader look like? 3) What does a bad spiritual leader look like? 4) Where can we find a good spiritual leader when we need one?

How does God feel about bad spiritual leaders?

When we read the Bible, we need to understand more than the words of the Bible. We need to understand the tone being used with the words.

Sometimes the Bible's tone is gentle and comforting. At other times, God can be strong and correcting. We like to think the only appropriate tone for God to use is gentle and loving so everything he says is soft as a feather. That isn't true. There is a time when the most loving thing to do with our words is to yell. There is also a time when the most loving thing God can do with his words is to yell.

Let me give you an example. If the house is on fire, we don't call up the stairs to the kids in a gentle voice. That is time to yell! The situation is critical. Your kids must listen. To not yell would be unloving because a house on fire is a life-or-death situation. In the same way, in these verses, God was yelling because the situation was critical. The spiritual leaders in his day needed to return to honoring his name or things were not going to go well. The situation was critical.

As we get into the text, I need to warn you there is R-rated material in this section, because God is yelling.

And now, O priests, this command is for you. If you will not listen, if you will not take it to heart to give honor to my name, says the Lord of hosts, then I will send the curse upon you and I will curse your blessings. Indeed, I have already cursed them, because you do not lay it to heart. Behold, I will rebuke your offspring, and

spread dung on your faces, the dung of your offerings, and you shall be taken away with it. So shall you know that I have sent this command to you, that my covenant with Levi may stand, says the Lord of hosts. Malachi 2:1–4 (ESV)

God promised to curse their blessings.

God said the priests needed to get serious about giving honor to God's name or he would curse them. That is the last thing anybody wants to hear from God. In fact, God said every blessing they gave would be turned into a curse.

One of the jobs of the priests was to speak God's blessing over the people. Here is one of the blessings they used frequently.

The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. Numbers 6:24–26 (ESV)

Since their hearts were not set to honor him, every time they went to bless the people, God would turn it into a curse on their lives. In fact, that was already happening. This is heartbreaking. Every pastor wants to be a blessing from God on people. To turn every good thing they tried to do into a curse would be devastating.

Why was God turning their blessings on others to curses on their own lives? They were not honoring God in the sacrifices they offered and the teaching they gave. They were living for their own glory, not God's glory.

God promised to rebuke their children.

Then God turned up the heat. Not only would he curse them but he would go after their kids! I don't know about you but would get my attention. I love my kids. I have prayed for them by name almost every day of my life from the time I knew they were conceived. I will do anything for my kids. How many parents love

their children more than their own lives? If God says, you better shape up and start to honor me or I am going after your kids, that would get my attention.

Why was God threatening to not just curse them but go after their kids? As the spiritual leaders of God's people, they were setting the pace for the spiritual lives of God's people. Rather than helping God's children they were destroying God's children. God said, "See how you like it. If you ruin the lives of my children, see what it feels like when I ruin the lives of your children. Am I getting your attention?"

This is not the only time God has said this about spiritual leaders gone bad. He also said this in Hosea.

My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge; because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest to me. And since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children. Hosea 4:6 (ESV)

Now it gets graphic. Parents, you may want to plug your children's ears.

God promised to rub feces on their faces.

I know this is not the typical stuff you usually hear in church. Some of you will go home and tell your friends pastor Kurt told us about rubbing poop on someone's face. You had no idea this kind of language existed in the Bible. Remember the tone. God was angry with the spiritual leaders of that day for the dishonorable sacrifices they gave. He was angry at the priests for the dishonorable way they taught God's people. God was upset because instead of these priests rescuing people from hell, they were sending people to hell. Do you see why God was so upset?

How many of you are hunters? After you shoot an animal, the first thing a hunter does is gut the animal. The one thing you do not want to do when you gut

the animal is slit open the intestines. Just like poop smells bad on the outside of the body, it smells really bad warm on the inside of the body. If you slit the intestines it will make a horrible stinky mess.

In the Old Testament sacrificial system the gut pile was taken outside the camp where it was burned. God said, "I am going to put the dung of the gut pile and put your face in it then discard you priests with the gut pile outside of the camp."

Does anybody think God was upset? The priests in the Old Testament plus the pastors and teachers in the New Testament have a very serious job to honor God and faithfully represent him to the people. When they dishonor God with their lives or their teaching God gets very, very angry, because it gives a false picture of God to the world and shames his name. God was so mad that in this section he threatened to put their face in a pile of poop.

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. James 3:1 (ESV)

Here is another example of the way Jesus feels about bad Bible teachers.

Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. Mark 9:42 (ESV)

Bad Bible teachers that lead people astray face severe punishment from God. I cannot emphasize strongly enough how God feels about Bible teachers that lead people astray instead of faithfully representing God's Word. Bad Bible teachers don't just send themselves to hell but they take many people with them.

I say this knowing that a number of you came to CrossWinds from another church. For some of you, this is the first time you are under Bible teaching. Your

previous pastors were nice people but they didn't open the Bible. You are over 50 and you are just now learning the basics of the faith. You are angry for what they didn't teach.

Some of you are rightfully upset because you were under a Bible teacher that was dishonest or manipulative. If you are upset about bad spiritual leadership, this passage tells us is God is far angrier about bad Bible teachers than you are.

We know how God feels about bad spiritual leaders, then he showed us what good spiritual leaders look like.

What does a good spiritual leader look like?

So shall you know that I have sent this command to you, that my covenant with Levi may stand, says the Lord of hosts. My covenant with him was one of life and peace, and I gave them to him. It was a covenant of fear, and he feared me. He stood in awe of my name. True instruction was in his mouth, and no wrong was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and he turned many from iniquity. For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts. Malachi 2:4–7 (ESV)

Malachi described what a good priest, a good spiritual leader, looks like. He reached into Israel's history to give them an example to follow. This priest was Levi and the first Levites. Let's see what we can learn about good spiritual leadership from their example.

A good spiritual leader is honored by God.

My covenant with him was one of life and peace, and I gave them to him....

The tribe of Levi was first set apart by God after Moses came down from Mt. Sinai. As we know from Bible history, God took his people out of Egypt and brought them through the wilderness to Mt. Sinai. Moses went up Mt. Sinai where

God gave him the Ten Commandments. Moses was gone for 40 days. During that time, instead of waiting patiently, God's people turned away from him. Aaron made a golden calf. God's people threw a huge party that the Bible tells us involved sexual fornication. It was a huge toga party. Instead of God's people living holy lives, they were living in sexual sin. Moses came down Mt. Sinai to see everybody running out of control. He said, "Who is on my side? Who will stand with me?" The Levites came to his side and they went through the camp slicing people with the sword that were involved in this sexual sin. The Levites held up the holiness of God and his honor among the people. This was not easy or fun. Look what the book of Exodus tells us.

And Moses said, "Today you have been ordained for the service of the Lord, each one at the cost of his son and of his brother, so that he might bestow a blessing upon you this day." Exodus 32:29 (ESV)

Honoring God meant they needed to kill some of their own sons and some of their own brothers because they were involved in the wild frat party and worship of the golden calf. The first priests were set apart to be priests because they treated God in a holy way. They gave God the honor he deserved even at great personal cost to their families. As a result, God set them apart to be his priests and promised to bless them because they held up his honor. Honoring God even at great personal cost is what a good priest is called to do. When good spiritual leaders hold up God's honor, God promises to bless them.

God cares for his faithful priests. God cares for faithful pastors. God cares for faithful spiritual leaders when they honor him at great cost.

A good spiritual leader fears God.

It was a covenant of fear, and he feared me. He stood in awe of my name...

God is looking for his spiritual leaders to honor and revere his name. In Deuteronomy 33, it gives us another window into the godly character of the Levites.

And of Levi he said, "Give to Levi your Thummim, and your Urim to your godly one, whom you tested at Massah, with whom you quarreled at the waters of Meribah; who said of his father and mother, 'I regard them not'; he disowned his brothers and ignored his children. For they observed your word and kept your covenant. They shall teach Jacob your rules and Israel your law..." Deuteronomy 33:8–11 (ESV)

This passage is interesting. The beginning and end of these verses describe the godly character of the Levites. The middle of these verses describe two situations where their godly character showed. The second situation is the one we just studied about their character at the base of Mt. Sinai. They were willing to disown their own family members when it came to slaughtering those immersed in pagan sin. The example before that is more mysterious. It refers to them being tested at Massah and when God's people quarreled with him at Meribah.

In that situation, God's people were without water. They began complaining to God how they were dying of thirst. Moses was told to speak to a rock and God would bring water out of the rock, but Moses let his anger get the better of him. He struck the rock twice and water flowed. It doesn't say this in other parts of Scripture, but I suspect the Levites acted differently from the people in that situation. Remember the structure. These verses begin and end talking about the godliness of the Levites. In the middle are two examples when they showed their godliness. Apparently while the rest of the Israelites were

complaining against God because they didn't have water, in that situation, the Levites maintained a good attitude and trusted God when they didn't have water.

Some of you may disagree with me. That is OK. I am not saying this dogmatically. It just appears to be the teaching of the text.

This is where it gets interesting. What this verse appears to teach us is the Levites held up the honor of God in two ways. They held up God's honor by their actions at the base of Mt. Sinai when they were willing to enact God's judgment even on family members that had fallen into sin. They were also willing have a holy attitude at the waters of Meribah when they didn't gripe against God because of their thirst.

The first Levites honored God in their actions and their attitudes. What did we learn about the priests in Malachi's day? They dishonored God in both their actions and their attitude. They snorted at the difficulty of their work.

A good spiritual leader fears God, honoring him in both their actions and their attitude.

A good spiritual leader is committed to teaching God's Word.

True instruction was in his mouth...

We often think of the priests in the Old Testament as the ones who offered sacrifices. That was only part of their duty. The other part of their duty was to teach God's word to God's people.

The book of Nehemiah gives us one example of how they taught the Bible.

...the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places. They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. Nehemiah 8:7-8 (ESV)

The way it worked is their Bible was read. They stopped and the priests explained God's words to the people so they could understand it. Next, they read a little more and the priests explained then applied the Word to God's people. That is called expository preaching. Doesn't that sound familiar? That is very similar to the way we teach the Word of God at CrossWinds. We read the Word, teach the Word and apply the Word.

A good spiritual leader is committed to the truth.

No wrong was found on his lips...

Not only does a good spiritual leader teach God's Word but he is committed to telling the truth and doing what is right no matter how hard it may become. A good Bible teacher is the exact opposite of a politician. Politicians are known for saying one thing and doing another. A good spiritual leader should always be known for truth. The priests in the Old Testament were to be with the judges to decide cases that were a dispute between people. Why were the priests to be judges between people? It is not because the priests were specialists in legal matters. It is because the priests were to be specialists in truth.

If any case arises requiring decision between one kind of homicide and another, one kind of legal right and another, or one kind of assault and another, any case within your towns that is too difficult for you, then you shall arise and go up to the place that the Lord your God will choose. And you shall come to the Levitical priests and to the judge who is in office in those days, and you shall consult them, and they shall declare to you the decision. Deuteronomy 17:8–9

This is why it says if there is a dispute between people at the church they should bring it to the elders of the church. It is not because the elders were legal

specialists but because they were to be known as specialists in the truth and not playing favorites.

A good spiritual leader is committed to a godly life.

He walked with me in peace and uprightness...

A good Bible teacher isn't just known for his public teaching but for the holiness of his private life. What happens in a spiritual leader's private life will eventually be reflected in his public persona. Look what Paul said to Timothy.

Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers. 1 Timothy 4:16 (ESV)

He didn't just tell Timothy to be mindful of what he taught but to also be careful how he lived. A good Bible teacher is attentive to his home life, his family life and his personal life. It matters what a good spiritual leader watches on the Internet when nobody is looking. It matters what programs a spiritual leader is watching when nobody is home.

Years ago, I ran across a quote from Robert Murray McCheney, a Scottish preacher who died at a young age. He said,

“According to your holiness, so shall be your success. A holy man is an awesome weapon in the hands of God.” - Robert Murray McCheney

I have kept that quote in front of me for years. It is from personal holiness that the world doesn't see, that determines the ultimate effectiveness of a pastor's ministry that the world does see.

A good spiritual leader turns many from sin.

He turned many from iniquity...

A good spiritual leader gets involved in people's lives. Like a lifeguard at the beach, he doesn't just sit on the beach and talk about saving lives, he gets in

the water to rescue those who are drowning. You can recognize a good Bible teacher because he is regularly involved in the messiness and inconvenience of people's lives. A good spiritual leader calls people to repent. He calls them to turn to Jesus and trust in God to be saved. The result is many people are turned from sin because a good spiritual leader makes the time to get involved in loving and caring for them.

A good spiritual leader maintains God's truth in a culture that challenges it.

For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts...

The job of a good Bible teacher is to teach God's truth in a world that undermines it. The word guard means to something maintain. The Hebrew word for knowledge doesn't mean erudite information but specifically refers to the application of knowledge to real life. A good Bible teacher's job is to hold the truth of the Bible and show you how it applies to the challenges of modern day living. When trends come to modern culture, a good pastor's job is to tell you what God's Word says about it and how we should live. An example would be the transgender debate that took place in our culture; another is the homosexual debate; another is the living together trend before marriage. A pastor's job is to hold onto God's Word and show you what God's Word says about those kinds of topics so you can go to your spiritual leaders to find out how God calls us to live.

What does a bad spiritual leader look like?

But you have turned aside from the way. You have caused many to stumble by your instruction. You have corrupted the covenant of Levi, says the Lord of hosts, and so I make you despised and abased before all the people, inasmuch as you do not keep my ways but show partiality in your instruction. Malachi 2:8–9 (ESV)

A bad spiritual leader doesn't hold to old truth but creates something new.

...you have turned aside from the way...

In the Hebrew, when it says these priests turned aside from the way, the Hebrew language used hearkens back to what happened when the people turned away from God to worship the golden calf at Mt. Sinai. You can see the similarities in the English.

They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a golden calf and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it and said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" Exodus 32:8 (ESV)

Malachi said the priests in his day were not like the original Levites who preserved God's honor. They were like the people who turned away from God and made a golden calf.

When God's people turned away from him at the base of Mt. Sinai, did you ever wonder why they made a golden calf? Why didn't they make a golden chicken? Did you ever wonder why they had a crazy party that involved sexual infidelity?

Worship of golden bulls and golden calves was common in Egypt and the surrounding cultures. The Israelites made a golden calf so they could be like their neighbors and fit into the culture around them. Temple prostitutes were the way the cultures around them worshipped. That is why the Israelites created a worship system based on sexual immorality.

They left the worship of God to create something new, something that fit into the world around them.

This is the footprint of a bad spiritual leader. Instead of holding to God's Word that is old, they created something new which fit in with culture.

Let me give you a modern example. The reason I give you this concrete example is because this bad Bible teacher has a new movie coming out. Many of our young people will be exposed to his teachings. His name is Rob Bell.

Rob considers himself a modern day Martin Luther. I disagree. Martin Luther called people back to the Bible. Rob Bell calls people away from the Bible and the historic Christian faith. He is a very slippery, manipulative teacher. Let me show you what I mean by quoting him.



I don't know why as a Christian you would have to make such declarative statements. [Why would you] want there to be a literal hell? I am a bit skeptical of somebody who argues that passionately for a literal hell, why would you be on that side?¹

What he has done is create a new way of thinking that fits in with the world. Most people do not believe a literal hell exists. They believe everyone is going to heaven, so Rob leans into that false belief. Let me show you what the Bible says.

...and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever. Revelation 20:10 (ESV)

And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. Revelation 20:15 (ESV)

¹ Rob Bell, *Ooze Interview* (July 2007).

And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.
Matthew 25:46 (ESV)

According to Jesus and the book of Revelation, the lake of fire exists. It is forever. All who have not trusted in Jesus will be there. It is in the book.

Let me show you another example. Most people do not see any urgency to repent of sin and trust in Jesus. Rob Bell leans into that false belief and creates new truth that fits the culture. He tells us there is no urgency to repent of sin and trust in Jesus. If you don't do it in this life, you have an eternity to do it in the next life.

There will be endless opportunities in an endless amount of time for people to say yes to God. At the heart of this perspective is the belief that, given enough time, everybody will turn to God and find themselves in the joy and peace of God's presence. The love of God will melt every hard heart, and even the most 'depraved sinners' will eventually give up their resistance and turn to God.²

The problem is this is not what the Bible teaches.

And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment,
Hebrews 9:27 (ESV)

But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life. Revelation 21:27 (ESV)

A bad spiritual leader doesn't lead people to a transformed life.

Caused many to stumble by your instruction....

We can recognize a bad Bible teacher because his teaching doesn't create true spiritual life. The Bible says God's words are living and active. They convict us of sin. We are born again by the word of truth. God uses his words to create spiritual life. We can recognize a bad spiritual leader because true spiritual life is missing in the people that follow him.

² Rob Bell, *Love Wins*, p. 107.

Let me give you another Rob Bell example. At one time, his church in Michigan had 10,000 people. Today, he no longer attends church. He lives in California where he does his movies and writes books. When it comes to marriage, he is in favor of same-sex

marriage. His book on marriage, The Zimzum Of Love, only has three Bible references in the entire book!³ Almost all of his words on marriage don't come



from the Bible but his own head. How many people have a life changed by God because of his teaching? Almost nobody. Changed lives are absent.

Rob recently came out with a TV show based on his name called "The Rob Bell Show." Who do you think sponsors the show? Christians? Absolutely not. Oprah!⁴ His show is about entertaining people, not about God changing people's lives through Jesus.

A bad spiritual leader is living for popularity.

But you show partiality in your instruction...

Instead of teaching God's Word honestly, bad spiritual leaders bend it and twist it. When it comes to sin, if people are powerful or rich or their friends, they will play to their favorites. The reason they do this is because they are more interested in pleasing people than they are in pleasing God.

³ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/the-zimzum-of-love/>

⁴ www.oprah.com/own/the-rob-bell-show-premieres-on-own-video

A bad Bible teacher has God fighting against him.

So I make you despised and abased before all the people, inasmuch as you do not keep my ways...

While God promised life and peace to the priests that feared him, God promised to fight against bad Bible teachers. The problem with bad spiritual leaders is they are seeking honor from people more than honor from God, so God takes the one thing they want, which is the applause of people, and he will eventually take that away.

Conclusion

We live in a world filled with teachers. We must be very discerning who we follow.

As I close I have some good news and some bad news. The bad news is I am a bad Bible teacher. If a good Bible teacher always tells the truth, he is never swayed by people, always fears God, and always rescues the lost, that is not something I do. I fall short far too many times. The truth is that every Bible teacher falls short of God's high standard in some way. That is where the good news helps us.

While I am not worth following, we are Christians. None of us are to follow the pastor in front of us. We are to follow Jesus. He was the perfect priest that offered the perfect sacrifice of himself. He always had the perfect attitude. He was the perfect teacher. He always told the truth. He never played favorites. He humbled himself and took on flesh to rescue us. Jesus is the perfect priest. He is the perfect spiritual leader, so he is the one we follow.

This week, while there are good pastors and other spiritual leaders worth following, the only perfect spiritual leader to follow is Jesus. That is why we fix our eyes on him, the author and perfecter of our faith. Join me in following him.



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