

Either Holiness or Else!

2:1-4

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“And now, this commandment is for you, O priests. If you do not listen, and if you do 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; and indeed, I have cursed them already, because you are not taking it to heart. Behold, I am going to rebuke your offspring, and I will spread refuse on your faces, the refuse of your feasts; and you will be taken away with it. Then you will know that I have sent this commandment to you, that My covenant may continue with Levi,’ says the Lord of hosts” (2:1-4).

The background of 2:1-4 lies in the narrative of Numbers 22—25. Israelite troops had taken the armies of two Amorite kings, Sihon and Og. Gilead and Bashan had fallen. The land of Moab was the next logical target. Balak, king of Moab, had persuaded Balaam to curse Israel so Moab would win. Three times Balaam tried, but instead of cursing Israel he blessed them. Balak was incensed and sent Balaam away (Numbers 24:10, 11). As the greedy prophet left, he gave one parting counsel to Balak. He urged the Midianite women to lure Israel into sexual sin (cf. Numbers 31:16; 24:1ff.). This maneuver succeeded, and Numbers 25 records the tragic results. Divine justice was swift, and the guilty leaders were executed while a plague ravaged the Israelite camp.

Even at the moment that Israel was witnessing God’s wrath upon her sin, Zimri, a Simeonite,

brought a daughter of a Moabite chief into the camp’s center for immoralities. Without respect to either Moses or God, Zimri’s blatant immorality typified Israel’s general attitude. His sin was defiant and met quick judgment (Numbers 25:6-8). Phinehas took a spear and killed both Zimri and the woman at the same time (see also Numbers 25:14, 15). Following the act of Phinehas, God spoke to Moses. A “covenant of peace” was established with this priest Phinehas (also called “Levi” in the tribal sense). This covenant was established because Phinehas guarded God’s laws (Numbers 25:12, 13). This acclaim of Phinehas was a wonderful heritage to those who followed his office as a priest of the Most High God. His descendants enjoyed this “covenant of peace” as long as they demonstrated his “jealousy” for God.

The chronicles of Israelite history turn forward several centuries to Malachi’s prophecy. While God remembered the heroism of Phinehas, the descendants of this courageous priest had failed to sustain a similar jealousy for God. The glory of the priesthood of Phinehas had turned to the shame of a self-serving priestly order. Malachi addressed a priestly class which was irreverent to God and indifferent to sin. They served God in an unworthy manner. They saw no need to reprove sin because they were participants in it. They did not try to awaken an awareness of spirituality; they even blinded the people to divine truths. The glory and honor of the

priesthood which Phinehas had highlighted had become blackened! The zeal and love for divine service had been extinguished. These sordid practices were detestable to God (1:6-14). When Malachi prophesied, all was the exact opposite of Phinehas and his history!

Malachi confronted the sad state of the Levitical priests. The stage was set for a dramatic showdown; the suspense was electrifying. God's prophet stood and with a clarion call of deity's commission, spoke this somber phrase: "This commandment is for you" (2:1). All eyes were fixed on the prophet. They were about to hear a warning in unmistakable terms—"You must choose a life of holiness, or else you choose wrathful judgment!"

THE CHOICE; EITHER HOLINESS OR STUBBORNNESS (2:2a)

Malachi's rebuke announced that the priests of Israel still had a choice to make. They could choose to refuse the Lord's call, or they could render unto Him the reverence due His Almighty position.

The message of Malachi presented three areas where Israel had to make a choice. First, the nation had to choose regarding God's Word. The word "commandment" (2:1) refers to an announcement from God. Israel was receiving divine instructions, and they had to choose how to react. They could not listen to God's Word and respond lightly. His Word deserved serious consideration because it presented God's authority. Only a fool would trifle with a command sent from the Almighty God! Malachi urged his listeners to choose to take God's Word "to heart" and obey it (2:2).

Second, Israel had to choose regarding God's name (2:2). God deserved respect ("honor"). Centuries earlier, Phinehas had chosen to honor God's name by rejecting the pagan worship (cf. Numbers 25:1, 11). Malachi called for the priests to remember and imitate this attitude of their godly forefather. Malachi's urging was clear: "Listen to God's Word, seriously contemplate it, and you will have to choose to honor God's name!"

Third, the erring priests had to choose regarding God's will. They had to choose to follow God's commands and to teach these commands to the people. Only by following unadulterated

teachings could the people's hearts be made right with God. The priests had chosen not to care about God's will. They had taught an imperfect message (2:3, 8). The priests needed to change their choice!

Thus Malachi presented Israel's priests with a distinct choice. The question was, would they listen to God's Word, respect His name, and follow His will? But what about us? We, too, face this serious choice. How will we choose? Do we listen to His Word? Do we honor and respect His holy name? Are we committed to following His will?

THE CONSEQUENCES: EITHER BLESSED REWARD OR SHAMEFUL CONTEMPT (2:2b, 3)

If Israel continued to not choose to repent and follow God, they had only the prospect of shame. Malachi's message details three shameful consequences which would arise if Israel chose not to honor God.

First, by failing to choose God's will, they would find curses instead of blessings. In consideration of the background of Numbers 25, we see that this is the opposite of what happened to Balaam. Balaam sought curses for Israel but found only blessings. Now Israel was seeking blessings but found only curses! God says through His prophet, "I will send the curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings" (2:2). All they attempted to do would fail. They would stand impoverished, disgraced, and contemptible. Everything the Israelites did would have "Failure!" stamped on it.

Second, by failing to heed God's Word, they would find a corruption that would invade and slowly destroy their whole life. Their foolish and ill-made choices would affect their "offspring" (2:3). The fruits of rejecting God's Word were stated by Jeremiah: "Hear, O earth: behold I am bringing disaster on this people, the fruit of their plans, because they have not listened to My words, and as for My law, they have rejected it also" (Jeremiah 6:19; cf. Zechariah 1:3-6; Isaiah 1:5, 6). When we disregard God's honor and His Word in life's choices, we, too, will find that all parts of life have become rotten.

Third, by failing to honor God, they would bring humiliation upon themselves (2:3). The scattering of dung in one's face was the most

contemptible act possible. Such was the manner in which Israelite priests were treating God. The priests had demonstrated great contempt in offering blemished animals in sacrifices, and now they would reap the consequences! Like the dung of the sacrificial animals that was taken outside the city and burned along with the skins and other waste, such would happen to the priests who chose not to honor God's holiness (cf. Exodus 29:14; 1 Kings 14:10).

A good illustration of this judgment is pictured in the burial of King Jehoiakim. Because he chose to dishonor God's name and ignore His Word, God said, "He will be buried with a donkey's burial, dragged off and thrown out beyond the gates of Jerusalem" (Jeremiah 22:19). There could be no greater humiliation and shame than such a burial. This was what would happen to those who chose to reject God!

In dramatic contrast to this shame is the blessed reward of "Levi" (Phinehas). Because he had chosen to listen to God, he was blessed (cf. Numbers 25:12, 13).

How much more dramatic can the issue be stated? The consequences of holiness will bring a blessed reward and the consequences of stubborn rebellion will bring a shameful contempt! The principle of "sowing and reaping" (Galatians 6:7-10) is illustrated here.

Malachi's point should not be missed. We all are making a choice. Are we aware of the consequences that will arise from our choice? Because of the choices we make regarding spiritual matters, we will reap blessed rewards or shameful contempt!

THE CONCLUSION; EITHER BELIEVE GOD NOW OR LATER (2:4)

Malachi's closing words intimate that all will eventually conclude that God's holiness must be respected. "Then you will know" indicates that there will be no uncertainty (2:4).

God's covenant with Levi (Phinehas) could continue, but only if the priests were willing to make a right decision. The covenant with Phinehas would have continued if the priests had made the right choice. Israel was being offered one last opportunity to choose holiness. If they refused, the covenant of peace would become a covenant of woe.

Surely this implied threat would cause them to recall their obligations to God. Remembering their obligations would cause them to be humble in knowing that their obedience was unacceptable. This understanding should have led to repentance.

If Israel chose to believe God *now*, they would admit the urgency of remaining "holy." But if they chose to ignore God's message, they would be forced to admit their error. This conclusion should not escape our attention. When some are faced with a choice regarding God's will, they procrastinate or ignore their obligation to obey God. Somehow they are convinced that they can spurn His love and get away unscathed. Even though they are rejecting God now, they will be forced to admit His sovereignty later (cf. Romans 14:11). Though God's love is available to all, not all choose to obey Him. Ultimately, all will be held accountable for the choice they make. Only those who are faithful to God will come to a blessed conclusion (cf. Romans 2:6-10).

CONCLUSION

Malachi emphasized the unyielding requirement of "holiness." He said that such is not a matter of casual concern. The choice is either holiness and its blessed rewards (Deuteronomy 33:10, 11), *or else* stubbornness and its awful punishment (2:2b, 3).

This proposition is valid for people today. All must choose holiness, or else they choose God's wrath! (Psalms 37:27; Deuteronomy 14:2; Leviticus 11:44a).

—John Kachelman

When Stubbornness Yields (Malachi 2:1-4)

Is it not sad that many stubbornly reject God's will only to be forced to admit it later? Pharaoh did (Exodus 12:3ff.), and so will all who refuse. Philippians 2:9, 10 says, ". . . that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, . . . and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

1. Stubbornness has its *opportunity*—"listen"; "take to heart" (2:2).
2. Stubbornness has its *choice*—"do not honor

- My name*" (2:2). (2:3).
3. Stubbornness has its *harvest*—"curse" (2:2); "shame" (2:3b).
 4. Stubbornness has its *influence*—"offspring"
 5. Stubbornness has its *admission*—"you will know" (2:4).
 6. Stubbornness has its *penalty*—"away" (2:4b).

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