

# Faithful Teaching

## Malachi 2:1-9

**Series:** Joel and Malachi (Fall 2020)

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**Topic:** Walking Faithfully with a Faithful God

**Worship:** Life and Peace

**Key Sentence:** Faithful teaching benefits God's shepherds and God's people.

**Outline:**

- I. Faithful teaching honors his name (Malachi 2:1-4)
- II. Faithful teaching is a ministry of life and peace (Malachi 2:5-7)
- III. Faithful teaching does no harm (Malachi 2:8-9)

**Malachi 2:1-9** “And now, O priests, this command is for you. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>So shall you know that I have sent this command to you, that my covenant with Levi may stand, says the LORD of hosts.

<sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>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.

<sup>8</sup>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, <sup>9</sup>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.”

## Faithful Teaching

### Malachi 2:1-9

The world is full of teachers and students. Elementary teachers help children learn math and English. College professors teach arcane subjects. Corporate trainers teach new hires. Preachers and teachers often teach in formal church settings. But it goes beyond that. Craftsmen teach apprentices. Coaches teach athletes. Proficient auto mechanics teach up-and-coming mechanics, quilters teach quilters, and so on. In the church a lot of teaching takes place in Sunday School classrooms and even the nursery. But the same thing happens between two men over breakfast, between co-workers over lunch, ladies at a children's play date. And of course, such instruction happens in families, between fathers and children, mothers and children, and even older to younger children. All of which is to say that pretty much everyone is on the giving end of instruction.

The good news is that there is great blessing, even life and peace found in sharing God's truth. Faithful teaching benefits God's shepherds and God's people. One of my favorite examples, which I've used before, is seen in the legacies of Jonathan Edwards and Max Jukes. Edwards was born in 1703 in East Windsor, Connecticut. He attended Yale University at age 13 and became the pastor of his grandfather's church at 23. He was one of the greatest thinkers America has produced. Edwards and his wife, Sarah, had eleven children. Despite a rigorous work schedule that included rising at 4.30 a.m. to pray and study, extensive travels and constant ministry, he made time to teach and be with his children. This investment had a huge impact on the peace and blessing of his family for generations. Benjamin Warfield of Princeton, basing his work on a well-known secular study, charted the 929 known descendants of Edwards. What he found was incredible. Of his known descendants there were 13 college presidents, 86 college professors, 40 judges, 100 lawyers, 60 physicians, 314 war veterans, 430 pastors, 75 authors of prominence, 7 congressmen, 3 governors, and one Vice President of the United States.

But the influence of teaching and modeling truth also works the other way. Consider the case of Max Jukes, a contemporary of Edwards. As an adult, Jukes had a drinking problem that kept him from holding a steady job. He spent little time caring for his wife or loving and instructing his children. The descendants of Max Jukes were also studied. They are a stunning contrast to Edwards' legacy. Of Jukes' 1026 descendants, 310 died as paupers, at least 300 were criminals (including 27 murderers), more than 500 were alcoholics or drug addicts, and about 190 of his female descendants were prostitutes; only a small fraction ever learned a trade, and most of these learned their trades in jail.

The point is that a godly influence helps people stay on the right path, and an ungodly influence often leads to straying from that path. Since each of us is on the giving end of instruction one way or another, we all have a chance to influence others with God's word. We'll find in Malachi 2:1-9 is that faithful teaching benefits God's shepherds and God's people.

I've intentionally stated the key thought positively, but you won't be surprised to hear that Malachi mixes positive teaching with strong warning. He begins by saying that by their negligence in teaching and modeling the truth, the priests of his day have forfeited the blessings of their instruction. Malachi 2:1-4 *And now, O priests, this command is for you. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>So shall you know that I have sent this command to you, that my covenant with Levi may stand, says the LORD of hosts.*

Though these words are addressed specifically to the priests, they can readily be applied to all of us because (1) our lives are supposed to honor God, just as theirs were, and (2) each of us is on the giving end of instruction and modeling the Christian life, in at least some areas and relationships. So this admonition isn't just their problem, it's also significant to us. The specific call is to listen to God's word and honor his name. Remember Malachi is speaking God's word, speaking for God to the priests. So, 'listen' means 'listen to my word' and 'set your heart to honor my name' means 'live in a way that glorifies me.' As in chapter 1, the Hebrew word associated with 'glory is here translated 'honor'. The word denotes the weight, or sheer gravity of God's presence. A person who recognizes the greatness of who God is and what he has done, and whose life reflects those truths is the one who glorifies or honors God.

In particular, Malachi says we are to honor God's name. This is six times already in Malachi that God's name is mentioned. To this Hebrew audience honoring God's name would mean honoring all that He is in his person, attributes, reputation, and character. God's name had been disgraced and made to appear shabby and weak by the way the priests had offered their gifts, carried on their ministry and begrudged God the time it took. Now it was time to reverse this pattern and give glory to God's name. The same concern is expressed in the New Testament when, for example, Paul says of false teachers that "They claim to know God, but by their actions they deny him." Paul says that they "are detestable, disobedient and unfit for doing anything good."

God has a similar opinion of the priests in Malachi's day, so he says to them "I will curse your blessings." You have to have a little background to understand that. The priests were descendants of Aaron, the brother of Moses and the first high priest. Aaron was himself descended from Levi, one of the twelve sons of Jacob. One of the things the priests and the Levites were supposed to do was to pronounce blessings on the people of Israel. We see this in Deuteronomy 10: "At that time the LORD set apart the tribe of Levi to carry the ark of the covenant of the LORD to stand before the LORD to minister to him and to bless in his name." God's law itself laid out both the blessings by which Israel would be blessed and the curses by which she would be punished. Moses says "See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: <sup>27</sup>the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God, which I command you today, <sup>28</sup>and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the LORD your God." One of the jobs of the priests and Levites was to monitor the spiritual life of Israel and remind them of God's blessings and warnings. But what happens if they pronounce blessing when they should be warning? God will give the opposite of the blessings they predict. He will curse their blessings. He says "if you will not take it to heart to give honor to my name . . . then I will send the curse upon you and I will curse your blessings."

What do we learn for ourselves when we are on the giving end of instruction? That we can't afford to neglect truth. We can't just tell folks about God's blessings, his love and goodness without also teaching about his justice, righteousness and holiness. We need to teach that all have sinned, and that God judges sin, so we can offer those we instruct the real blessing of forgiveness and new life in Jesus. God will not bless teachers who, Jeremiah's words "heal the wound of my people lightly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace." In our day such crippled instruction is all too common. We have popular preachers who will not use the word sin. We have others who urge us to "unhitch from the Old Testament." Such teachings are not blessed. They may appear to be, from a worldly perspective, but no real spiritual blessings result. In our moment, as we consider an election which at times seems condemned to tear the country further apart, we ourselves need to take this warning seriously and double down not on political furor, but on communicating God's truth in all of our formal and informal opportunities to teach.

Malachi becomes very graphic about God's response to this in verse 3: "I will rebuke your offspring, and spread dung on your faces, the dung of your offerings, and you shall be taken away with it." This is one of those verses so blunt it's almost hard to talk about. God says he will take the dung off the barn floor or maybe even the entrails from their sacrifices and rub it on their faces. Then he will sweep the priests out with the refuse, because their ministry is of no value.

God sends this warning, through Malachi, verse 4, not in order to reject his people but so that his covenant commitment to bless them might continue. He calls that commitment his covenant with Levi. As we read in Deuteronomy 10, God chose Levi's tribe to lead Israel's worship. They were the ones who offered the sacrifices, taught, and served at the tabernacle. Now God is saying to the Levites and priests that if they want to continue with that role they need to be faithful teachers and to honor God with their lives and their instruction.

Verses 5-7 reveal the positive side of this warning. Faithful teaching is a ministry of life and peace. *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. <sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>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.*

God characterizes the covenant he made with the priests and the Levites as one leading to life and peace. As I read this I wondered 'does that mean life and peace for Levi and his offspring, or for those they ministered to?' Malachi isn't clear, and other Scriptures support both these ideas. On the one hand, God declares to everyone that obedience to him and to his law leads to life and peace. In Deuteronomy 4:40, for example, Moses says "Keep his decrees and commands, which I am giving you today, so that it may go well with you and your children and that you may live long in the land the Lord your God gives you." Later, in Proverbs 3 Solomon says "My son, do not forget my teaching, but keep my commands in your heart, for they will prolong your life and bring you peace." Life and peace are the result of learning and obeying God's word, and Paul teaches in the New Testament that they are at the same time a result of setting our minds on the Spirit. As we instruct, we open the door to these blessings for others. The tribe of Levi were God's instructors, and in choosing Levi for this, God was giving them the blessing of himself as their inheritance, just as he gives us the blessing of himself through the Spirit.

The key characteristic Malachi cites as blessed by God with life and peace is faithful instruction. Verse 6: "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." Let's apply these qualities to ourselves in our many roles as givers of instruction. First, we need to embrace the right attitude: "he feared me [or revered me]. He stood in awe of my name." The fear of the Lord is the beginning of the wisdom. Without it we cannot teach others wisdom. As we've said from time to time, this fear includes wonder at who God is and what he has done, true fear of his judgment, and respect for his authority.

These things, in turn, grow out of our real knowledge of God. Proverbs puts these two things in parallel: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.” The more we know God the more we are in awe of his greatness, power, and love, his sacrifice for us. The more we know God the more we fear his judgment, first, on those who have never been rescued from sin through Jesus, and second, judgment of us, potentially, as unfit to serve him because we have not done so. Finally, as we know God more, we respect his authority. He is God and we are not and he has the right to tell us what to do and to order our lives in ways we can’t understand. Faithful instruction is given by those who have learned to fear the Lord.

Second, true instruction honors God with our words. “True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips.” Anyone who has opportunity to influence others is obligated to give true or faithful instruction. The word translated ‘true’ combines our concepts of truthfulness and faithfulness. This certainty of character and speech is a characteristic of God we are supposed to imitate. And the place we find truth worth sharing is in God’s word. When the Levites or the priests were doing their jobs right, they were saying again what God had already said. Not too many years before Malachi a great revival broke out when the Levites, Nehemiah 8:8, stood and “read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.” This is true instruction.

Notice the contrast: “true instruction was in his mouth; nothing false was found on his lips.” True or false. The light is on or it’s off. The path leads up or down. You can’t have both at the same time. Where God’s word makes truth plain, we are never to substitute false words or false hopes or false vanities. This is what Satan did in the garden of Eden: he cast doubt on God’s word, he offered what seemed to be a better outcome than God’s promise and he amplified the person rather than the creator. In our day countless secular and even religious teachers have forty or a thousand ways to cast doubt on the Word of God: “science says,” “experience says,” “reason says” that what God says cannot be true. Example: creation. False teachers have taught culture to laugh at the idea of an omnipotent creator and mock the plain evidence of God’s design.

Again, countless teachers and politicians offer what they say will be better outcomes, more loving, more just, more successful cultural norms than the plain teaching of the Word of God offers. Example: transgenderism. Gender and sexual orientation offer an infinite number of possibilities. Find yours and you’ll be happy, they say. But in God’s clear biological plan, at the cellular level, this is not true. Every child is conceived male or female. False teaching does not like clear binaries. False teaching wants to offer a range of possibilities.

Again, countless teachers offer false vanities, promising things from human nature that human nature can never deliver. Example: defunding police. When you try, as was done in Seattle, to set up a police-free zone you find that someone has to deal with violence, arson and looting. These things do not disappear even in the most sought-for utopias. The history of communism reveals that if you remove one source of authority a worse and less just one rises in its place. Right teaching recognizes the weaknesses of human nature.

True instruction begins with reverence for God, it speaks the truth of God and, third, it lives according to the precepts of God. Verse 6 “He walked with me in peace and uprightness.” Faithful instruction comes not just from what we say, but from how we live. It starts in peace with God. The New Testament shows that we have peace with God only through faith in Jesus Christ as our rescuer and redeemer. In the same way righteousness, uprightness, is found only in Him. To faithfully instruct others, we must first receive the peace and righteousness that are gifts of Jesus. And having received these things, we walk in them. It’s possible to leave the way of peace and walk into anxiety, depression, anger or bitterness, which will not only devastate us personally, but cripple our ability to instruct others. In the same way, having been declared righteous, we can choose to walk into sin, addiction, and hurtful attitudes and actions toward others. Persistence in sin puts the lie to any instruction we’re trying to give.

In fact, fourth, Malachi says that the purpose of true instruction is “to turn many from iniquity” or sin. Walter Kaiser says “the goal of all faithful proclamation of the Word is to lead sinners to repentance.” It’s easy to get caught up details or issues that aren’t really central to the Christian life, but if we focus on the one hand on reaching those who have never trusted Jesus, showing them the hopelessness of sin, and praying and rejoicing as God calls them to himself, that’s true teaching. Add to that a focus on discipleship, helping people be what they’ve become in Christ, helping them put off the old sinful nature and put on Jesus, and you’ve got yourself a worthy purpose.

Finally, verse 7, true instruction clings to God’s word. “the lips of a priest should guard knowledge.” The Hebrew word for “knowledge” is torah, the word often used as a technical name for God’s law. Psalm 119, the longest chapter in the Bible, is all about torah. Verse 18: Open my eyes, that I may behold wonderful things from Your “torah”. Psalm 19 tells us that the “torah” of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul, and that it is more to be desired than gold. So the “torah” a teacher keeps and the “torah” a teacher shares, the “torah” that is on his heart and on his lips is nothing less than the Word of God. What people are really looking for from their teachers, or ought to be, is “torah,” true instruction from God’s word, not the latest fads or vanities.

The person who shares ‘torah’, Malachi says, is the messenger of the Lord. This is the only time in the book he calls a priest a ‘messenger of the Lord.’ Normally this phrase refers to the “angel of the Lord”, often an appearance of Christ in the Old Testament. In Haggai 1:13 it refers to a prophet, and in Malachi 1:1 it is the name of this prophet. Later Malachi will use this phrase, ‘messenger’ to refer to the forerunner of Christ, John the Baptist. Here the point is that because of their formal teaching ministry, which we saw in Deuteronomy, the Levites acted as God’s messengers. In fact, though, anyone who has ‘torah’ on their lips and in their hearts will be acting as the Lord’s messenger.

But of course, the priests of Malachi’s day did not fulfill this ideal, and therefore did not see the promised blessings. Verses 8 and 9: *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, <sup>9</sup>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.*

Do you see the contrast? Your faithful instruction and faithful example, whether it’s in your home to your children, or in your Sunday school class, or with your peers, can help people turn from sin and walk in the way of righteousness. But if you turn from that way, you cause others to stumble. These priests had turned. We saw in chapter 1 that they despised the laws about sacrificial animals and dishonored God’s name. God says to them “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.” The people, seeing their actions, had lost all respect for these priests. They had tried to court popularity by giving the people what they wanted and by modifying God’s requirements so that regard for persons and partiality in justice, not God’s Word, were the norms. But now the priests would reap the dishonor they had sown.

In the same way, those who today pursue popularity or water down God’s word, or simply leave it out of their teaching and their relationships with others often end up having no influence at all in the lives of those they should be instructing. Even worse are those who should be instructing but who give in to the temptations of sin, thus living as gross hypocrites. They bring shame not only on themselves but on the name of the one they profess to believe.

Remember the two families we opened with. Jonathan Edwards focused on true instruction and personal faithfulness, and his descendants reaped a benefit of life and peace for generations following his death. Max Jukes was a role model of worldliness and weakness, and his descendants followed in his footsteps. The point is that there is life and peace in faithfully sharing God’s truth.

It is that positive thought I want to leave with you, the ideal laid out in verses 5-7: (1) to revere God and fear his name; (2) To say again what God has said, so that true instruction comes from your mouth; (3) to walk with God in peace and uprightness, so that your life and your words agree, and (4), to call others away from sin and show them the right path and (5) to cling to His Word. Those are the ideals of faithful instruction. As we pursue them our instruction, formal and informal will become not only more faithful but more effective.

I decided early in the week to use that opening illustration about the two families, but as I continued to study and research I ran across an interesting fact that makes me want to end with Jonathan Edwards as well. He was, as I said, one of America's greatest theologians, a philosopher, an academic, president of Princeton University in New Jersey, a scientist, and a leader in revival. His church, First Congregational Church of Northampton, Massachusetts, was one of the first points of ignition for the Great Awakening, under his ministry. In pursuing this I stumbled across a web site that told of a very interesting inscription on his grave in Princeton Cemetery, but when I found some pictures of the grave, I couldn't see the inscription, though it may be there. Later another web site gave me the impression that the inscription might be in the church at Northampton, but I couldn't verify that either, though the inscription sounds like it could be on the wall of a church. Here's what it says:

“In memory of Jonathan Edwards, Minister of Northampton from February 15, 1727 to June 22, 1750: “The law of truth was in his mouth, and iniquity was not found in his lips: he walked with me in peace and equity, and did turn many away from iniquity” Do you recognize that? It's Malachi 2:6 in the King James Version. That's the testimony to Jonathan Edwards' life, the positive ideal for all of us who have the opportunity to influence others for Jesus.