

SEVEN EXPECTATIONS FOR GOD'S MESSENGER

One of the tragic stories in the Bible tells what happened while Moses was up on Mt. Sinai receiving God's law. In Moses' absence, Israel got tired of waiting and made a golden calf, proclaiming it to be the god who brought them out of Egypt.

Of course, with a new god, you have to have a celebration. They had a feast that ended up as an out of control, drunken orgy. So God sent Moses back down the mountain to straighten out the mess. The Bible says: "Moses saw that the people were running wild and that Aaron had let them get out of control... So he stood at the entrance to the camp and said, 'Whoever is for the LORD, come to me.' And all the Levites rallied to him. Then he said to them, 'This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'Each man strap a sword to his side. Go back and forth through the camp from one end to the other, each killing his brother and friend and neighbor.'" The Levites did as Moses commanded, and that day about three thousand of the people died. Then Moses said, 'You have been set apart to the LORD today, for you were against your own sons and brothers, and he has blessed you this day'" (Exodus 32:25-29).

The Levites' immediate passion to honor God caused God to choose the tribe of Levi as special to himself. After the conquest of Canaan, the tribe of Levi would not receive an allotment of tribal lands like the rest. God would be their portion and their inheritance. God would provide for them through the tithes, offerings and sacrifices of all Israel. Levites would serve God.

A later incident further confirmed God's choice. This time Israel was approaching the place from which they would launch their invasion of Canaan. Once again Israel was seduced by idolatry and immorality. One man in particular brought a pagan woman into the camp for a sexual encounter.

It so happened that they walked right past the tent where Moses met with God. Outside the tent, godly men and women from Israel were weeping before God, distressed at the sin of the people. Phinehas, a grandson of Aaron, became so incensed by the flagrant idolatry and immorality that he got up, grabbed a spear, and killed the man and his sexual partner.

It's a shocking story to us. We're appalled by the violence. God was appalled at the idolatry and immorality—the dishonor flaunted before his holy presence. And God took note of the holy zeal of Phinehas. Listen to God's comment: "The LORD said to Moses, 'Phinehas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the priest, has turned my anger away from the Israelites; for he was as zealous as I am for my honor among them, so that in my zeal I did not put an end to them. Therefore tell him I am making my covenant of peace with him. He and his descendants will have a covenant of a lasting priesthood, because he was zealous for the honor of his God and made atonement for the Israelites'" (Numbers 25:1-11).

All of this earned a special place for the tribe of Levi. They would be the priestly tribe, set apart to stand before God on behalf of the people, and to stand before the people on behalf of God. They would lead Israel's worship, teach them God's laws, and represent God's interests on behalf of the nation.

Fast forward nine-hundred years. Israel has been through numerous cycles of backsliding and repentance. A final descent into idolatry resulted in God's judgement. First Assyria took the northern ten tribes into captivity. Then Babylon conquered Judah, destroyed Jerusalem and its temple, killed the leaders, and carried off all but the poorest in the land into captivity.

More recently, Israel had returned. They rebuilt the temple and the city walls. Worship and sacrifices had been restored. But the people became weary of the long recovery. They had grown resentful of God's requirements and had taken to bringing God second best.

The priests, those who had been given the special honor of representing God's interests before the people, let their responsibilities slide. So God, through the prophet Malachi, took them to task. We heard God's opening salvo last week as we looked at Mal. 1:6-14. God finishes in the opening verses of chapter two: Mal. 2:1-9.

It is a terrible indictment. God's warning is graphic—stunning. We politely sanitize it for public reading, but look at v. 3 again. The “offal” God threatens to smear on the priests' faces is what's inside the stomachs and intestines of sacrificial animals. It's the kind of stuff that belongs on a manure pile. Under the sacrificial system, the offal from the animal was unclean. They carried it off to a place outside the city and burned it. God threatened the priests with defilement by washing their faces in manure and carting them off with the rest of the waste products.

Why? Because they failed in their primary obligation to honor God. They failed to teach God's people God's laws. They discriminated in how they applied the laws of sacrifice, bending the rules for some and demanding strict obedience of others.

Those who stand before others in God's name and teach God's truth have a higher level of accountability before God. These priests had failed at a fundamental level, and if they didn't pay attention to God's warning, God was about to set them aside.

It is a terrible verdict. But in what God says, we get insight into seven expectations God has for those who stand before others to represent God and speak for him. The first two are found in verse two.

- *Listen to God*

If we're going to speak for God we jolly well better be paying attention to what God might be saying, especially when it is a personal rebuke. Prayer is essential—listening prayer; obedience in prayer.

A British General during WWI once told his officers: “Before I face the responsibilities of the day, before I give an order to a single officer, I stand at attention before God.”

What a great picture of prayer—standing at attention before God, giving God our undivided, focused attention. God expects those who represent him before others to listen to him, to pay attention to him and determine to further God's purposes. They don't use God to get what they want.

- *Set his heart to honor God*

“...set your heart to honor my name.”

This requires a fundamental re-ordering of our interior self. We come hard-wired with a determination to please ourselves, both to do and to get what we want. We feel the inward pressure to act in ways that make us look good, so others will think well of us, like and respect us. We can even use our life in Christ as a means of self-fulfillment and self-advancement.

We see it writ large in some who promote themselves in their media kingdoms. They use the name of Jesus to ask for money to support lavish lifestyles. We sometimes miss it on the smaller stages of our local churches where individuals use ministry to feel good about themselves. Whenever our need to be needed outstrips our determination to honor God, we fail fundamentally.

When we stand at attention before God, that is a good time to sort out who's honor comes first. We sing the song lyrics: "Amazing love! How can it be that you my king would die for me? Amazing love! I know it's true. Its my joy to honor you; in all I do I honor you."

Those who claim to be God's messengers must learn to sing this song with humility and conviction and set the honor of God above the honor of self!

• *Fear God—stand in awe – v. 5*

"...this called for reverence and he revered me and stood in awe of my name."

Honor and reverence go hand in hand. The old hymn tells us: "Twas grace that taught my heart to *fear*." We don't really understand reverence and respect for God until we have stood before God unmasked and exposed to his holy scrutiny.

Isaiah's experienced that. In Isaiah 6, Isaiah says he saw the LORD in the fulness of his awesome majesty. Perhaps for the first time in his life, he saw himself and the people around him in the piercing light of God's holiness. It unraveled all his pretensions. He pronounced woe on himself, because he had seen God.

We see God most clearly in his Word, the Bible, where God makes himself known. Those who speak for God must have a clear enough perception of God to have authentic reverence for God. You can't fake respect.

The priests feared people more than God. That's why they let obedience slide. If we presume to speak for God, we must be more anxious for God's approval than for the approval of our audience.

• *Teach God's truth – v. 6*

"True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips."

I am dismayed by the current unraveling of evangelical commitment to truth. We get nonsense from prosperity preachers like Joel Olsteen who define sin as "...an offence against the self that keeps us from health, wealth and happiness right now" (in *Christless Christianity*, by Mike Horton). The good news is reduced to becoming a better you by doing your best.

We get confusion from some who teach that following Jesus is more important than believing in Jesus. Doing what Jesus did in his life matters more to God than believing in what Jesus accomplished in his death. The cross is reduced to a moral example, and the sacrificial death of Jesus is demeaned as divine child abuse.

We don't get to make up God's story as we go along. God has already spoken: he didn't stutter and he didn't mumble. It is the task of those who speak for God to speak God's truth with clarity, conviction and compassion.

• *Live with godly integrity – v. 6*

"He walked with me in peace and uprightness..."

Humble obedience to God provides the only authentication of those who claim to speak for God. God expects those who represent him in this world to align their lives with God's character and laws. This doesn't make them legalistic moralists. Their obedience to God confers on them godly integrity. How they live matches what they say.

• *Turn people from sin – v. 6*

"He...turned many from sin."

This can get tough. Turning people from sin can be as simple as showing them how God wants them to live. And it can be as difficult and scary as warning people about their disobedience and calling them to repentance.

This expectation requires both courage and gentleness, conviction of truth and humility, reverence for God and love for people. But it's what God expects from those who speak for him.

I remember a conversation with a young man who came into my office to make a confession of sorts. He said, "Pastor, I made a mistake." I told him, "No, you committed a great sin." He thanked me later and told me that those blunt words were a wake-up call that led him away from mere regret and into genuine repentance.

Not every conversation about wrongdoing ends up that way. Some become painful. We can't own the responsibility of others' response to God. We can only be faithful to seek to turn them from sin.

• Speak for God – v. 7

"...He is the messenger of the LORD Almighty."

And here we have come full circle. Priests were chosen by God to represent God. They are his messengers.

We don't have a priestly tribe in our churches who function like the Levites did in the temple. We do have men we call pastors who serve God vocationally. What God says in these verses helps shape our expectations of what pastors rightly ought to do and to be. This is a sermon the preacher needs to preach first in front of a mirror to an audience of one.

By extension, it applies to the lay elders of the church as well. They share responsibility for leading God's people and representing God's interests before others.

And there is a larger significance for all of us. We read last week that Jesus "...has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father..." (Revelation 1:6). All of us share in a royal priesthood graciously conferred upon us by Jesus. All of us represent God where we live, work, and play. So God's expectations fall upon all of us: expectations of listening to God, honoring God, reverence for God, commitment to God's truth and godly integrity, of having the courage to turn people from sin, of functioning as God's messengers in a fallen world.

There's something for all of us in this—something more important than we know. God has given us his grace and his Spirit to enable us to fulfill his expectations for us. We all miss the mark from time to time—we're not glorified yet. That's why God has made provision for confession, forgiveness and cleansing. But if we habituate ourselves to disregarding what God expects, and if we ignore God's warnings, if we persist in disobedience, we become people who deserve the same fate as the priests in the time of Malachi. God threatened to rub their faces in manure and haul them away with it. We disqualify ourselves from representing God.

Those who have been given great responsibility and great privileges have a correspondingly greater accountability before God. It is certainly true of those we call pastor or elder. But it falls as well upon all who follow Jesus, and who have been called by him into a royal priesthood, to represent him, his kingdom, his gospel and his church in a wider world.