



"Then they that feared the LORD spake often one to another: and the LORD hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the LORD, and that thought upon his name" (Malachi 3:16).

Cure for Stale Religion

Central Truth: Stale religion is overcome when God's people practice faithful stewardship.

L546. Date: February 1980. **Text:** Malachi 1:11-13; 2:7-8; 3:7-12.

Topic: Stewardship: Of Money; Worship.

Behold the shame of a sham religion! That religion which has "a form of godliness," but denies the power thereof is not worth having (II Timothy 3:5). In fact, it is worse than no religion at all, for it soothes the conscience and deceives the soul. Such a religion is a bother, not a blessing. It is counterfeit religion which can never produce peace with God or power with men.

The religion of Judah in the period near 400 B.C. was a sham religion. At one time in Jewish history, the people brought lavish gifts to the temple even though their hearts were far from God. But at the close of the fifth century before Christ, the gifts had degenerated to the vile and refuse. The people's hearts were still far off from true devotion to God. It was in that situation that God spoke to Judah through the prophet Malachi.

Malachi was a man of God with vigorous personality, strong convictions, and stalwart faith. When others were giving up their ancestral religion, he put deeper the roots of his faith and held even more firmly to the truth. He pled for diligent and dignified observance of the rituals of religion, but he had a deep sense of the spiritual nature of religion. Someone wrote of him, "He feared no man because he feared God so much. With rapier thrust, he struck home. Skillfully he stripped off the hypocritical vesture with which priestly hands had decked the skeleton of wickedness." Malachi gave a

remedy which is a sure cure for stale religion.

I. SPIRITUAL WORSHIP (1:11-13)

Worship “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:23, 24) is the first and best cure for stale religion. Worship is simply ascribing “worth-ship” to God, acclaiming Him worthy.

God is worthy! *“For from the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same my name shall be great among the Gentiles; and in every place incense shall be offered unto my name, and a pure offering: for my name shall be great among the heathen, saith the LORD of hosts”* (Malachi 1:11). You feel it in your own heart, don't you? Let your heart respond to God with the cry, *“O LORD our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!”* (Psalm 8:9).

It is not enough to call God by pious terms. Men of Judah called Him “our Father, our Redeemer, our Potter.” But their hearts were far from Him. Terms of endearment are meaningless unless they express the true sentiment of the heart. God is dishonored by insincere worship. It acts as if He sees nothing but actions of the body, but not the intent of the heart. It supposes rituals are magic which influence God apart from the heart. Never!

Judah had a system of religious ceremonies by which she could express her devotion to God, confess her sins to God, receive forgiveness of God, and otherwise have a full and meaningful worship experience before God. The offering of sacrifices and the performance of rituals were methods of personal contact with God in worship. Multitudes of people had met God that way and received untold blessings. But some generations thought the rituals alone were enough. That is why their religion grew stale.

It is never enough for a Christian just to go to church, to sing hymns, or sit respectfully through Bible study, to bow the head when prayer is offered. Those are mere meaningless rituals unless the heart is set to seek God personally. Even the Christian religion grows stale when it has no personal fellowship with God at its heart.

Part of the rituals of Judaism was to present bread, drink offerings, and animal sacrifices to God. Malachi's generation were offering second-best things to God. The bread they offered was not fresh, but too stale for their own use. The animals they offered were blind or sick and no longer profitable to them. Such action showed a spirit of contempt for the table of the Lord.

Would anyone do that today? Yes, many do. The teacher who goes to class unprepared, the worshiper who sleeps through the worship service, the

giver who tips rather than tithes (perhaps giving less to God than he will spend for his family's Sunday dinner!), or any other person who gives less than his earnest best to God in worship is committing the same kind of sin.

What is God's attitude toward those who offer Him second best in anything? *"I have no pleasure in you saith the LORD of hosts, neither will I accept an offering at your hand. . . . But cursed be the deceiver, which . . . sacrificeth unto the Lord a corrupt thing: for I am a great King, saith the LORD of hosts, and my name is dreadful among the heathen"* (Malachi 1:10, 14).

Take careful inventory. How sincere and meaningful is your spirit in worship? Do you offer God your best in private devotion and in public worship? Having taken inventory, set your heart to be a good steward in worship. That is the sure cure for a stale religion.

Be warned. The people of Malachi's generation did not intend to break off their relationship with God. They needed Him and wanted His blessings and help. They rather sought to get His best at the least cost to themselves. They became guilty of spiritual fraud, and their relationship with God suffered as a consequence. It always happens that way.

II. FAITHFUL TEACHERS (2:7, 8)

The priests of Malachi's day held a unique position. They were standing between God and man. They received sacrifices from men and presented them to God. They received messages from God and passed them on to men. They were mediators which represented men before God and represented God before men.

Yet, the priests fell into a very subtle trap which was set by Satan. They became more aware of men than of God. They sought the good will of men rather than the approval of God. That led them into three great errors. (1) They did not rebuke the people when they had sinned. (2) They accepted unworthy sacrifices which the people would offer to God. (3) They did not speak the real message of God to the people. The results were tragic. God said to those leaders of religion, *"Ye are departed out of the way; ye have caused many to stumble at the law; ye have corrupted the covenant"* (Malachi 2:8). The very leaders of religion became perverters of religion. No wonder the religion of Judah grew stale.

God deliver us from teachers of religion who do not teach the whole counsel of God. Yet, there are many leaders in the field of the Christian religion who do not believe the doctrines of the faith and do not teach the

truth. Every believer is obligated under God to seek out and sit under a faithful teacher of the Word.

God changes blessings to curses when His truth is not taught. He warned the priests of ancient Judaism, “I will even send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings: yea, I have cursed them already, because ye do not lay it to heart” (Malachi 2:2). *Curse* means “judgment” in that warning. No man can bless that which God judges or successfully condemn that which God blesses.

God is dishonored when sin is bypassed and ungodliness is winked at. It happened in ancient Israel. It is happening in modern America. Be sure you are in a church where the Bible is believed, taught in truth, and obeyed in practice. Beware of the religious leader, by whatever name he goes, who does not teach the whole counsel of God as revealed in the Word of God. The Word of God cures stale religion.

III. CONSISTENT STEWARDSHIP (3:7-12)

Imagine the audacity of the sin of trying to rob God. Yet, that is what Malachi accused his generation of doing. No wonder their religion was stale. Any religion will suffer if it is not supported by consistent stewardship.

There are two ways by which a person can rob God. (1) He can take away that which another has given to God. (2) He can withhold that which he should give to God. Robbery is a serious crime among men, but it is especially serious when a person robs God.

In antiquity, God wrote into the unwritten law of man's heart the importance of giving one day in seven of time and one part in ten of treasure for God's use and purpose. Ancient nations which did not have the Hebrew law (Mesopotamia, Egypt, and others) practiced the giving of one-tenth plus free-will offerings to the support of religion. Abraham observed that practice four hundred years before the law was given by Moses. Jacob pledged one-tenth of his income to God three hundred years before the law was given. At last, when God set up a system of religion for the Jews, He made this stipulation. “*All the tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land, or of the fruit of the tree, is the LORD'S: it is holy unto the LORD*” (Leviticus 27:30). Israel adopted a practice of financial stewardship which had been practiced for centuries and used it to support her religious system.

Revival of religion always witnesses faithful financial stewardship: apostasy always witnesses neglect in the area of finances.

God challenged the people of Judah to a trial. “*Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and PROVE ME*

NOW HEREWITH, saith the LORD of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it. . . . And all nations shall call you blessed: for ye shall be a delightsome land, saith the LORD of hosts” (Malachi 3:10, 12). God could have called for the tithes on the basis of obligation. Instead, He promises blessings for obedience: “Try Me and see what blessings I will give for obedience!”

Blessings both material and spiritual are promised for obedience. He who warned that heaven would be closed by sin among His people (II Chronicles 7:13) promised that heaven would be opened by faithful obedience (Malachi 3:10-12). God makes a proposition: “Give Me proof of your love by your gifts, and I will give you proof of My love by My gifts.” What a blessed exchange (Proverbs 3:5, 6)!

There is no specific chapter and verse in the New Testament which obligates a Christian to tithe or suffer the judgment of God. Christians are urged to give out of love. But surely Christian love would prompt no less a gift than the Jewish law required, would it? Let the Christian give liberally.

The lesson has examined God's word to ancient Judah to find ways to relieve the problem of stale religion. Three principles have been found. (1) Stale religion is overcome when worship is sincere and spiritual: (2) Stale religion is overcome when the Word of God is taught faithfully and received gladly. (3) Stale religion is overcome when stewardship is practiced consistently according to biblical principles. Those guidelines are as applicable today as they ever were.

If you are having a problem with lack of life and vitality in your religion, apply those three principles. The fault does not lie with God. He is available to the honest heart.

“Then shall ye call upon me, and ye shall go and pray unto me, and I will hearken unto you. And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart” (Jeremiah 29:12, 13).

1. Who was Malachi?
2. What was the religious problem in Malachi's day?
3. How might that same problem manifest itself today?
4. How can Christians manifest Malachi 1:11 in worship?
5. How did the priests fail in Malachi's day?
6. How might that problem be manifest today?
7. What is Christian stewardship of finances?
8. What blessings does God give for faithful stewardship?

9. By what principle should a Christian guide his giving?
10. How can you make your spiritual life more dynamic?