

Questions to Ask Yourself If You Are a Leader

These past two weeks have been somewhat difficult for me personally, because a dear friend of mine who I love and who I have been knit together with in Christian ministry for a number of years was discovered to have been involved in secret sin and, as a result, had to resign his pastoral position. Over the years I have been through this a number of times where a dear friend, a colleague, someone who I've done conferences with, folks who even came here to minister are discovered to have fissures in their lives that finally broke under the strain of attempting to cover up a double life. The wheel that was coming loose for some time secretly finally fell off for the public to see.

Now, I have been doing a series from the minor prophets that I have called "Major Lessons from the Minor Prophets". And we come to the book of Malachi, which is a book about God's standards for Christian leaders. For me, personally, it has been quite challenging and quite probing given the recent painful experience that I have had with my dear friend.

Before we consider some of the things that the Bible teaches about Christian leadership, I always like to provide you with a little bit of historical background to any text that we are looking at because, remember, the Bible is not just a book of ideas, philosophies that were the invention of the mind of man. The Bible is a record of events that actually took place. The Bible is a book of history, not a book of philosophy.

To give you a little bit of a backdrop to the book of Malachi, some of you may know that the Jews were exiled in Babylon in 586 BC as a result of their sin and idolatry. After the

exile, they came back to Judah, which today would be called the nation of Israel. They came back to Israel and rebuilt the temple under the ministry of the prophet Haggai. That is where we started our series, with the book of Haggai. So the temple in Jerusalem was rebuilt in 520 BC. But as we have discovered in looking at both people's lives as well as the life of a nation, there seems to be a common thread of erosion and decline morally and spiritually. After a time of revival there is a notable decline.

And that is what happened in the nation of Judah. The temple was rebuilt and for a time there was a great seeking of God, a hunger after God and an obedience toward God. But 70 years later, we find a sloppiness in people's approach toward God and a sloppiness in their worship and their marriages.

So God raised up the prophet Malachi to speak to the people. His ministry overlapped the historical book in the Old Testament of Nehemiah. In fact, both Malachi and Nehemiah speak to the same kinds of moral issues. For those of you who are Bible students, you may want to cross-reference the book of Malachi with Nehemiah 10-13, because the same issues of inter-marriage, financial abuse, abuse of the sacrifices in the temple are mentioned in both Nehemiah and Malachi.

Malachi, by the way, to give you a broader global perspective, prophesied about the same time that Socrates was developing his particular school of philosophy in ancient Athens. We are talking about 440 years before the time of Christ – 440 BC.

Of course, you have probably noticed if you have opened the Bible, that the books of the Bible are not arranged in alphabetical order, so you won't find Malachi in the middle of the Old Testament under M. Malachi was the last prophet commissioned to write scripture before the birth of Jesus. So, since Malachi was writing 440-450 years before the time of

Christ, there is a long period in Jewish history where no one was commissioned with the task of writing scripture.

I think this is an important argument in terms of the inspiration of the Bible. You see, the Jews believed that their history was shaped by the direct intervention of God. This was a fundamental conviction of the Jewish people – that God, the Almighty, was supernaturally intervening in the world and was particularly involved in directing the history of Israel. As part of that supernatural intervention, the Jews believed that God was also prophetically intervening in their lives. That he was sending prophets to speak to them and prophets to write down God’s words to them.

Now, the beliefs of the Jewish people can be explained naturalistically. Perhaps the Jews just wanted to imagine themselves to be special, to be chosen. And so they contrived this story of God who was intervening in their past and they attributed their national existence to God. Many nations, by the way, have done that throughout history. The Romans did it. The Greeks did it. Many different people groups wanted to make themselves the center of the universe, so they came up with various myths and legends to support their claim of chosenness.

But for those who would say that the Bible came about naturalistically, that it was simply a feature of Jewish culture, that the Bible is not the direct result of divine intervention, to such people I would ask, then, “Why didn’t the Bible continue to be written?” Do you understand the question? If the Jewish culture produced the scriptures wholly apart from divine intervention, then why didn’t the Jewish culture keep producing the scriptures? Why did the scriptures suddenly stop being written following the prophet Malachi? And why did the scriptures suddenly begin to be written again with the advent of the ministry of John the Baptist after 400 years of silence?

See, friends, the reasons the Jews stopped writing the Bible following the prophet Malachi is because the Bible is not simply a human invention or the product of Jewish culture. The Bible stopped being written because at a certain point in history, God stopped prophetically intervening. He stopped inspiring people to write the Bible. And the reason the Bible began being written again after 450 years is because God, once again, began to prophetically intervene in the lives of his people, the Jews. There is nothing in the cultural history of the Jewish people to account for the sudden stopping, the silence for 450 years and the sudden speaking for about 50 years, and then stopping again, apart from the recognition of the Jewish people that God was intervening and then God suddenly stopped intervening.

What we are going to consider today, the message of Malachi, God's last written prophetic intervention in the life of the Jews for 450 years and the last thing that God spoke to his people about, concerned leadership. It is often said that last words are lasting words. People remember the last things that someone says. If Mom, Dad, a spouse is dying, we remember their last words on their deathbed forever. Last words are lasting words. And the last words of the Old Testament, at least in part, are about leadership. And so I have titled today's message, "Questions to Ask Yourself if You Are a Leader." Let's pray.

So the text begins,

"An oracle: The word of the Lord to Israel through Malachi. 'I have loved you,' says the Lord. 'But you ask, 'How have you loved us?' 'Was not Esau Jacob's brother?' the Lord says. 'Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated...'"

Now, for students of the Bible, this statement of the Lord, "But Jacob I loved, and Esau I hated" really causes a lot of problems. It causes great difficulty in people's minds as they try to figure out why God would choose one person and reject, or not choose, another

person. I have talked with lots of people who have attempted to think of reasons for God's choice of a person to make it make sense. There are books written that God really doesn't choose people. And essentially God chooses a plan and then we choose God, but that God doesn't choose anyone.

Part of the difficulty for us as Americans in approaching the text of the scripture is that our understanding of justice in America is that every privilege and opportunity, in fact even the results of life, ought to be evenly distributed. Democracy means that everyone starts off at the same place and everyone should end in the same place.

But the fact is, life is not very even in its distribution of privilege or its distribution of benefits, is it? Every one of us realizes that some kids, even in the church, are raised in stable families with parents who have a lot of wisdom and thoughtfulness about what they are trying to do as parents and what their goals are. These kids have discipline applied to them with wisdom. From the day the child is born, the parents have a plan regarding what they are trying to accomplish with their kids. The child grows up in a home where learning is encouraged, where reading is encouraged, where spirituality is encouraged. Parents are praying daily for their kids, guarding them from harmful influences, meting out discipline with balance and fairness. Permitting some freedom and, yet, restricting liberty where it is appropriate.

Maybe these children also have athletic ability and good looks. Maybe, in addition, they have the ability to learn quickly. Maybe their parents can afford to pay for college. Some children just seem to have all the advantages of life. Life is just handed to them on a silver platter.

Other children are raised in poorer quality families with fathers and mothers who have no plans for discipline and who just blow up at their kids and scream, yell and curse. There

may be violence in the home. Maybe Mom or Dad has some kind of addiction, so even though the child is loved, that addiction saps away emotional energy that ought to be directed toward the child. Maybe the finances in the home are poor so that the child doesn't get many opportunities for enrichment and education. Maybe the child also suffers from a learning disability or a physical handicap. Maybe they have a predisposition to hyperactivity so that it is difficult for the child to sit in class and from an early age the child is labeled as a discipline problem. And he gets into the wrong classes with the wrong group of kids.

And while we all feel that it shouldn't be so and that it is not fair that it is so, life distributes privileges unevenly. And the fact is, friend, there is this lack of even distribution in the kingdom of God. People are not evenly gifted. Some people are ten talent people and some people are five talent people and some are one talent people. There is not an equality for opportunity for service. There is not equal anointing and blessing on individual ministries. Those who work hard and labor hard and pray hard do not always see the same amount of fruitfulness as others who work less hard. The ground is soft in some places and hard in other places. Doors don't open up and others do. In fact, one of the fallacies of leadership seminars is the notion that leadership is a set of skills that can be transmitted to anyone, and that the person who gets these skills will experience the same kinds of opportunities and successes and blessings as the person who is standing on the platform or doing the writing.

I have always compared it to watching a film of Michael Jordan driving the baseline toward the basket, doing a little spin, and then into the air, switching hands and bringing the ball under the hoop and over. And then Michael Jordan sits down with you and says, "OK, this is exactly what I did." He shows you the move again and again and then hands you the

basketball and says, “OK, now you do it.” Some things are not transferable. A seminar or a book will not compensate for a lack of talent.

And in the plan of God, as a result of God’s sovereign freedom, his right to rule as God sees fit, God says, “Jacob I loved and Esau I hated.” What does that mean?

I don’t want you to get the wrong idea of God’s “hatred” and of Esau. When the word hatred is used in the Bible, it doesn’t always connote ill will or a desire for revenge or retribution - the animosity that we would normally associate with hatred. Hatred in the Bible often means “less loved” or “less preferred.” A good Old Testament example of hatred is found in Jacob’s relationship with his second choice of a wife, Leah. Rachel was the loved wife and Leah was the hated wife. But when the Bible describes Rachel and Leah that way, it simply means that Leah was the less preferred wife, the less loved wife. Jacob didn’t mean Leah some ill will. He didn’t want to see her life ruined. She was just less loved. And you can see this usage in the New Testament where hatred means less preferred in Jesus’ own words in Luke 14:26 where Jesus said, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters, yes even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.”

What does Jesus mean? He is not calling his followers, as Christians, to show ill will toward their parents, or towards their family members. Unless you really despise your parents, unless you show them disrespect and talk back to them and borrow their car to smash it up, you are not worthy of me. That is not what Jesus is saying. What he is saying is that “Unless you prefer me, the Lord Jesus Christ, to every other relationship, unless my opinion is more important to you and more valuable to you than your parents’ opinion of your life, unless what I direct you to do and what I say to you takes precedence over what your parents say to you, or what your brothers or sisters say to you, or what your friends say

to you, unless my valuable system weighs in more heavily in your life than even the most important person on earth's valuable system weighs in..." Unless Jesus' goals are the supreme goals for your life so that they supplant even your parents' best wishes for you, unless he is number 1, then you are not a good follower of Christ.

So, let's tie this all together and see what the Lord's complaint was against the people and particularly against the leaders of Israel in that day, because Malachi is directed toward leaders. It says, "I have loved you," says the Lord, "but you ask 'How have you loved us?' Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" says the Lord, "Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated..." Now here is the charge of the Lord against the people and their leaders: The people are constantly looking at their lives, and the leaders are looking at their lives in ministry and are saying, "What is the evidence that God really loves us? I hear about God's love all the time, but I don't see any particular sign of God's real love for me in my life, in my home, in my family, in my ministry, in the church. Where is the proof that God loves me?" And the Lord responds and says, "Don't you understand how privileged you are, Jacob?"

Christian, do you understand the privilege of being called a Christian? Does it mean the world to you that you are called a child of God? If you are a Christian, and you struggle with this issue of "How has God loved me?" it would be appropriate for you to go through the New Testament and search out every passage that describes what God has sovereignly chosen to give you. Do you understand the enormous privilege of being chosen by God?

Unfortunately, I think this electing choice of God has gotten so watered down in most people's minds that they are not thrilled, they are not stimulated to worship God as they contemplate his marvelous choice. Let us remember certain things about God's choices. First of all, they are not conditioned by anything in us, foreseen or unforeseen. Paul, in

quoting this text in Romans 9, says, “Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad - in order that God’s purpose and election might stand: not by works by him who calls - she was told, ‘The older will serve the younger.’ Just as it is written, ‘Jacob I loved, Esau I hated.’”

Before Jacob and Esau were born or did anything good or bad, God determined to choose Jacob. The difficulty is not why Esau was less preferred, but why Jacob, the grabber, was preferred: the deceitful man. The marvel of God’s choice is not that he hates Esau, but that he loves Jacob. And the marvel of God’s choice is that he loves you and chose you.

See, here is the difficulty in the modern conception of choice. Many people think about the plan of salvation as God basically throwing out a lifeline into a pond in which a lot of people are drowning. God throws a lifeline out. People are drowning. And those people who choose, maybe because they are wiser or because they want to, or because they are better, or because of something, those people who choose to grab hold of the lifeline get pulled in by God.

Well, I suppose that will evoke some measure of joy and gratitude toward God. Thank you, God, for throwing me a lifeline. But you know, that is not the biblical picture of salvation – God throwing you a lifeline. The problem with the lifeline image is that it regards men and women too highly. The Bible portrays us before God’s intervention, as being dead in our sins and trespasses, opposed to God. The position of a person who doesn’t know Christ, who is not yet born again, is not that they haven’t yet gotten the lifeline, the position is that they are rejecting God actively, consistently not choosing to put God first. To use the lifeline analogy, the position of men and women in the world is that God throws a lifeline out, but they cannot grab hold of it because they have no arms or hands. They are incapable of grabbing hold of God.

So biblically, what we find is that God is not simply content to throw us a lifeline, and sends his son into the water to grab hold of people who are trying to push it away and who are spitting in his face and who are mocking and yelling at him. God sends his son into the water for such as these and he grabs hold of those who cannot save themselves and who are drowning, who need more than exhortation to grab hold. They need new capacities. And this son of God drags people out of the water at the price of his own life. It is when we recognize what our position was and what God actually did to secure us safely on shore that we can give ourselves back to God in gratitude and in surrendered service. This, by the way, is Paul's entire model of how a man or woman relates to God. "I had no capacity to either save myself or even help myself, but I was carried out of the water by a Savior at the price of his own life."

And so to people and to Christian leaders, God asked, "Do you understand the enormous privilege of being called by God and chosen by God?" Is it a small thing to you to be chosen? You know, privilege, chosenness is a horribly misunderstood concept in today's world. There used to be concept of privilege and chosenness that was close to the biblical concept in the patrician class of America, the privileged class back 50-60 years ago. There was this notion among the privileged that they were given their station in life as a sacred trust. There was a calling upon them to do public service, to do good for those who were less fortunate than they were and who had less opportunities. Many of our political leaders in the last 20 years were raised with this patrician notion of privilege that translates into service. This was really a biblical idea, "To whom much is given, much will be required."

So those of you who have been given talents, privileges, opportunities, and to leaders a calling to leadership, you were not given these things so that you could feel good about

yourself or lift yourself up above someone else. No one is given the privilege of being talented - to preach or to lead worship, to evangelize, to counsel; the privilege of being able to make a lot of money or to have a heart for the broken or a heart for children - no one is given something by God just to feel good about themselves. You are given what you are given so that you can use it for the good of others and for the glory of God.

How do you relate to the privileges that God has given you? Does it move you toward an increased sense of responsibility? Toward profound humility and gratitude?

Malachi goes on in vv. 6-12 and says, “A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If I am a father, where is the honor due me? If I am a master, where is the respect due me?” says the Lord Almighty. “It is you, O Priests, who show contempt for my name.”

Again, most of the book of Malachi is directed toward the leaders of God’s people. It should hit us as pastors, as kinship leaders, as women’s leaders, worship leaders, children’s leaders the hardest, especially when God says, “It is you, O Priests, who have shown contempt for my name. But you ask, ‘How have we shown contempt for your name?’ You have placed defiled food on my altar. But you ask, ‘How have we defiled you?’ By saying that the Lord’s table is contemptible. When you bring blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice crippled or diseased animals, is that not wrong? Try offering them to your governor! [Invite the head of your company over and serve him up what you serve me up. Invite your boss over. Invite the man or woman that you are trying to impress and treat them the way you treat the Lord.] Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?’ says the Lord Almighty. ‘Now implore God to be gracious to us. With such offerings from your hands, will he accept you?’ - says the Lord Almighty. ‘Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar! I am not pleased with you,’ says the Lord Almighty, ‘and I will accept no offering from your

hands. My name will be great among the nations, from the rising to the setting of the sun. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to my name, because my name will be great among the nations,' says the Lord Almighty.”

What a powerful charge. What an incredible rebuke. That there are times when God would actually say to a church or to a person, “Stop worshipping. I wish you would just lock the church doors. Stop the music. Turn the electricity off. Put down your guitars. Turn the lights off. Let this place be dark and empty.” Because what is going on in that particular church or this particular service is in vain. It is worthless. Can you have a stronger rebuke than that? Everyone just go home. Let’s put out a sign, “Out of Business” on the church door. The Lord is saying, “You are just going through the motions. Your worship is unacceptable.”

How would you know if this text applied to you? How would you know if you visited a church whether that church has adopted an attitude that was unacceptable to God? How would you know when God is putting his fingers in his ears and saying, “Stop, that is enough. Stop singing, and it is not because you are singing off key, but it is because your worship is off key. I would rather you did nothing than to do this.” Phony preaching. Phony religion.

And in v. 9 when Malachi speaks of entreating the Lord, “Now, implore God to be gracious to us.” Literally, that word “implore” means to make things smooth with God, to butter him up. How do you know when you are just trying to butter God up? When what you are doing is inauthentic?

I think part of what is going on in this rejected worship is that a Christian and a Christian leader begin to adopt an attitude that says, “Anything is good enough for God.” That because God is gracious I can give him the leftovers, the scraps, the damaged blind animals

and God will still be merciful to me. Deidrich Bonhoffer says, "That as grace is free, it is cheap." So as I would never treat anyone I respected this way - give them the leftovers all the time, all day, all week, every minute - I will treat God that way. It is okay regarding the Lord. Anything is good enough for God. So it is okay to give God the worst time of your day right before you fall asleep at night. That is the time you set aside to read the Bible instead of the time you are really fresh and alive and in touch with the Lord. Just give him the worst time. The time when you are really stressed. You are in the car and say, "Well, I haven't really prayed" so you shoot one up. You give God the leftovers of your money after you have gotten your entertainment needs filled and your clothing needs filled and the demands of every one else and the demands of your family, then give the dregs to God.

And this business of offerings that God doesn't accept also has to do with how we relate to the little things in life. The priests got sloppy with God. It doesn't really matter how we treat the little things. Let me speak to you leaders. A good test of your heart is how sloppy you are getting regarding the things of God. The priests in Malachi's day were real sloppy.

You say, "Well, what do you mean, Rich, by how sloppy am I getting?"

Well, how sloppy are you getting with your words? Are you continually on top of the accuracy of your words or has it just become a habit to speak inaccurately, to exaggerate, to make things other than they were, to cut corners with your words?

Are you on top of the little things of humor? Are you getting sloppy with off-color humor? Are you scrupulous with handling the nickels and dimes in reporting back to your work place when you have change left over? Do you pad your account?

Are you sloppy in your relationship with the opposite sex? Is there a creeping impurity?

See, the priests in Malachi's day, and what I see when a man or woman begins this downward spiral, is that they get really loose in the little things. The little things don't

matter. After all, God is merciful and gracious. We start abusing the privilege of position that we have.

There is in all of this a challenge to us regarding the use of God's grace. God's grace is intended to change us. It is intended to mold our hearts. God's grace is not an excuse for us to treat God poorly. Or to treat God with less respect than we would treat casual acquaintances.

Here is a third charge that God has against the priests and against leaders. Verses 12-13: "But you profane it by saying of the Lord's table, 'It is defiled,' and of its food, 'It is contemptible.' And you say, 'What a burden!' and you sniff at it contemptuously," says the Lord Almighty."

You don't appreciate your privileges, God says. You think anything is good enough for God. You are sloppy with the little things. And you have adopted an attitude of cynicism, even boredom, regarding Christian ministry and service. You say, "What a burden." One of the gauges regarding your present relationship with God's Spirit is your level of boredom with the things of God. When the things that are associated with God become boring and burdensome to you, when you approach worship and say, "Oh, how boring" and church doesn't thrill you and sharing your faith is burdensome and reading the Bible is a drag – something is really off regarding your interaction with the Holy Spirit. Boredom is one of the first indicators of a person's downward spiral, their loss of spirituality.

One of the reasons for boredom, of course, is that we have become jaded. I say this in love, but I really feel like I should say it. I have been in and around the charismatic movement for 23 years. And one of the characteristics that I have seen recur in many places and in many churches is a jadedness regarding the things of God. There is not an excitement, a sense of awesome wonder, just an innocent joy at the fact that God's Holy

Spirit would do anything with us. Over a period of time, what occurs even regarding spiritual gifts is a jadedness – Been there, done that. The worse possible condition of a church is when even revival is boring. When your heart is so calloused toward the Holy Spirit that you no longer take joy at people's salvations and no longer take joy at repentance, joy at healing. It is so wonderful to watch people come into and experience God's Spirit and they are fresh. They are innocent. They are virginal, if you will. They cry through worship. They cry when they receive prayer. They are just so grateful to God that he would condescend to touch them.

And it is not only regarding the charismatic movement, but I think our lack of intimacy with God and our boredom has turned many Christians and many churches into becoming fad seekers. Churches become faddish in their search for excitement, something to thrill the people with. They are pushed and pressed to become cutting edge churches doing the most faddish thing. It is like the children in the market place that Jesus spoke of. We want you to do this and when you do that it is really not enough. It is not good enough. So we want the other thing.

In many Christian books on leadership, one of the requirements for being a good leader these days is to be innovative. It is interesting that nowhere in the Bible is a Christian leader ever asked to be innovative. It is an entirely American technological concept. In fact, in the early church innovation was condemned as the mark of a heretic because that meant that you were leaving the gospel and that you were whoring after the spirit of the age.

Let me give you a good positive barometer of your closeness to the Holy Spirit. Boredom, jadedness, quests for something new – that's not it. What is a gauge for closeness to God? Your present level of joy. Are you joyful?

Do you understand that if you are a Christian leader that Christian service is this most wonderful of intersections between what God is asking you to do and what your deepest longings are? That involvement in Christian service of any kind is not a burden, it is not a moving away from your deepest longings, it is a call for you to enter into your created and your redeemed full humanity? It is a call to joy. So boredom, a jaded attitude toward the things that God values, whether it is God's people, or worship, or the lost, means that you are far from his Spirit.

I heard someone once say that God loves a joyful pastor. God loves happy pastors. But God also loves joyful women's group leaders, joyful children's leaders, joyful food pantry leaders, joyful missionaries, and joyful mothers and fathers. Joy in life. Where is the joy?

Malachi continues with some of the probing questions of leadership in vv. 1-3 of chapter 2 where he says, "And now this admonition is for you, O priests. If you do not listen, and if you do not set your heart to honor my name," says the Lord Almighty, "I will send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings. Yes, I have already cursed them, because you have not set your heart to honor me. Because of you I will rebuke your descendants; I will spread on your faces the offal from your festival sacrifices, and you will be carried off with it."

This theme keeps coming up in the book of Malachi. It is a theme of misunderstanding what God is really saying to us in the Bible. It is so easy to veer off into the belief that fulfilling a job description or performing certain tasks or even getting certain results is what God wants from a leader. God's will is not fulfilled by the level of offering you give him. God wants the offerer. When the offering plate passes you every Sunday morning, God wants you, in a sense, to climb into the plate. Before you throw your money or your check in or let it go by, God wants you to climb in. Not just your billfold, but you. Week by week, day by day, what God wants is your heart.

Let me put it this way. Holiness before God is never a matter of just the outward stuff, how much time you spend in prayer, how many spiritual words can you use in an hour – it is always a matter of the heart. It is always a matter of what is going on inside. It is not what you look like to others, but what you look like before Christ. What you look like when you are alone and the only eye on you is Jesus' eye. What do you look like when you are alone? When you are just performing for Christ? That is a question a Christian leader needs to ask.

And the Lord strongly rebukes people when he says, "I am going to take the offal [literally, the waste] of your sacrifices." The entrails, the stuff you would normally wash away and get rid of. I am going to spread the waste of the sacrifices all over your face.

WOW. That is strong stuff. The Lord is saying that to Malachi because he is saying, "I am going to display upon your face what is really in your heart. I am going to make it obvious so that you can't live the way you have been living." That is what happens when we see a leader fall. What happens is not that the fall hasn't already occurred, but that God is taking the offal, the waste, and he is spreading it on their faces. He is saying, "I am going to make obvious what has been obvious to me, but my eye has not been enough for you to bring you to repentance. So I will have to bring the eyes of others on you."

I get professional newsletters and tapes and books as a pastor, just as many of you do in your professions. You may get an engineering newsletter, or take continuing education as teachers, or as therapists. Most of the skills that are taught for today's Christian leader are mainly managerial in nature. They involve vision casting, the ability to delegate, the ability to organize. A century and a half ago, a Scottish preacher, I think who died at age 29, a man by the name of Robert Murray McCheyne - who was such a good man that it was said of him that people used to break down and cry because of a sense of the Holy Spirit that was on

him - McCheyne said, "What my people need most from me is my personal holiness." What is most needed from a Christian leader these days is integrity when they are alone.

What does a church need from you, leader? What does the church need from me? The bottom line is not phenomenal gifting or innovation. But they do need someone who presents a model of Christian character. They need someone who is going for it in terms of living up to the standard that Christ has set for us. Someone who is trying to flesh it out in their own marriage, in their own speech, in their own prayer life.

Let me put it even more plainly. The measure of success of a Christian leader before God has almost nothing to do with what happens outwardly around that leader. It is not the number of conversions or the size of the budget. I believe that God will measure your success and my success in the main, based on things that God alone can see, and that no one else can see. The things of your heart. Your secret choices. It is what is going on inside of you that will illicit, or not illicit, the "Well done, thou good and faithful servant!" from Christ when you stand before him alone on the day of judgment.

And God's people need someone who will boldly teach God's word. Malachi goes on to say, "And you will know that I have sent you this admonition so that my covenant with Levi may continue," says the Lord Almighty. 'My covenant was with him, a covenant of life and peace, and I gave them to him; this called for reverence and he revered me and stood in awe of my name. True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and turned many from sin. For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, and from his mouth men should seek instruction—because he is the messenger of the Lord Almighty. But you have turned from the way and by your teaching have caused many to stumble; you have violated the covenant with Levi,' says the

Lord Almighty. “So I have called you to be despised and humiliated before all the people, because you have not followed my ways but have shown partiality in matters of the law.”

God is challenging leaders to fulfill their calling. To instruct the people of God in the written word of God. See, the priest’s job was not simply to offer sacrifices but to teach the law. To offer complete instruction in God’s word. And it is the role of any Christian leader, from the senior pastor down to the person who is discipling one other younger Christian or just a couple of kids, it is the role of a Christian leader to constantly communicate God’s word to the person they are trying to build up. One of the great tragedies is to fall short of what it really means to be a Christian leader by failing to announce to people what God says and what God thinks.

Verse 8, Malachi says, “You have turned from the way and by your teaching have caused many to stumble; you have violated the covenant with Levi.” To not announce God’s word, to simply be people pleasers or in today’s language, market driven, to say only what people want to hear rather than what God says they need to hear.

You know, Jesus said it would be better for us to have a millstone hung around our necks and to be thrown into the sea than to cause any one of these little ones to stumble. How many churches, how many of us as leaders, do not really address any really controversial issues in the life of another person because you know the person wouldn’t sit still for it? In many places there is an incredible avoidance of subjects like divorce or abortion or homosexuality or hell. Subjects are just avoided. And when they are taught on, they are taught in such a way to make sure that no one could ever be offended. So, what people hear at church may not be a whole lot different than what they get in Time Magazine.

See, I totally believe that in all that we communicate we must speak a redemptive, loving, hopeful, healing word. But we have to speak a complete word. And when Jesus spoke to

the woman caught in adultery he said, “Not either do I condemn you, [but he said] go and sin no more.” For a lot of us we are real good with the first part, “Neither do I condemn you” but we are not real strong with the second word, “Go and sin no more.”

See, here in the Vineyard, we want people to come to church just as they are. But we don’t want people to stay as they are. We want people to change as they hear God’s word and as they begin to relate to God by his Holy Spirit. It is a funny thing when a church and Christian leaders simply set out to cater to people. When the entire goal of ministry is to be “with it,” to be cutting edge. People get sick of that. To cutting edge priests, God says in v. 9, “I have caused you to be despised and humiliated before all the people.”

A few years ago in the New Yorker, a writer lamented the audience driven preaching that he was listening to with these words. He said, “The preacher, instead of speaking an eternal word, looks out upon public opinion trying to find out what the public would like to hear. Then he tries his best to duplicate that and bring his finished product into the market place in which others are trying to do the same. The public, turning to the church to find out about the world, discovers there is nothing in it except its own reflection. The unexamined world meanwhile drifts blindly into the future.”

There are several things that I think about when I stand up in the pulpit every weekend. One of them is the statement, “There is nothing more relevant than an eternal word from God.” There is nothing that I can say that will speak to your real needs than an eternal word from God himself.

The second thing I think is based on a quote that I once heard, “Whoever marries the spirit of the age will quickly find himself to be a widower.” Whoever marries the spirit of the age will quickly find himself to be a widower. If we in the Vineyard are nothing more than a baby boom or a baby buster church, if that is all we are in our essential rooting, then

we are going to just become increasingly irrelevant in 10-20 years as a new generation comes along. Our basic call, brothers and sisters, here in the Vineyard, is not to be a boomer church, not to be a buster church, it is to be a biblical church. To do and to say what we find in God's word.

The last thing – vv. 10-17, Malachi asks the leaders, “How are you treating those closest to you?” “Have we not all one Father? Did not one God create us? Why do we profane the covenant of our fathers by breaking faith with one another?”

Leaders in Malachi's day were disloyal to the people of God. And beyond being disloyal to the people of God, they were disloyal to their own wives. Verse 13: “Another thing you do: You flood the Lord's altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer pays attention to your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. You ask ‘Why?’ It is because the Lord is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. Has not the Lord made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith [again that phrase, ‘breaking faith’] with the wife of your youth.”

It goes on and says, “‘I hate divorce,’ says the Lord God of Israel.”

Part of what occurred with my dear friend, whose sins became public just a few weeks ago, is that there was a breakdown in his marriage vows. You know, the Lord in the book of Malachi is really trying to pull on our heart strings. He is getting very, very personal with us. Look at the way he describes the wife in v. 14 using three different phrases. He calls our wives, “the wife of our youth, though she is your partner and your wife by marriage covenant.”

I once counseled with a pastor whose wife left him. And after the initial shock, this man brokenheartedly said, “You know, I left her years ago for the church. I always made her compete with other people and with the ministry.” I wonder how many of you men have a mistress on the side of your job, your career? I wonder how many women have a lover on the side? Your career or your kids, your ministry – but not your husband.

Malachi is pulling on our heart strings. Sometimes what we need to hear is not a lot of purely intellectual reasoning. Our hearts need to be touched when they get hard. He calls the wife three things. He calls her the wife of your youth. Remember the one you were in love with when you were young? Remember what you would do for her when you were dating? You would drive miles, stay up all night. Like the song goes, “Sleep out in the rain. If she told me that’s the way things will be.” Remember what you used to do when you were young? She is your partner. You said she was your best friend. Is she really?

She is your wife by covenant. She is the one you made a vow to. It is like saying to a mom who is in the middle of yelling at her child not just that you need to stop yelling, that it is wrong, but painting her a little word picture. “Mom, look again at your daughter who you are fighting with all the time. Look at her. She is the one you nursed. She is the one you gave birth to. She is the one you held in your arms at the hospital and you kissed and licked and caressed.” This daughter that you are having so much trouble with, this son who has so many problems. Remember when you took him home from the hospital? The Lord is pricking the hearts of people who have lost their ability to love those closest to them, which is a sign of a spiral down in your leadership. It is always appropriate for us to approach Jesus Christ as the great physician who is probing us to discover where it hurts and where we are ill.

Now do you relate to the privileges God has given you?

How are you doing in the little things? Are you cutting corners? Are you careful with the truth? Are you careful with money? Are you careful with your relationships?

Are you bored? Are you joyful?

What do you look like when no one else's eye is on you but Jesus Christ? Are you willing to do and say all that the Bible requires?

Do you treat those who are closest to you really well?

As we approach the great physician, we always come as those who are sick, because we need his prescription. I don't go to Jesus because I am well and can answer all these questions wonderfully. I go to Jesus because he probes me and because I need a Savior. I need healing. I go to Jesus because my hands are empty. And he is the only one who can fill them.

Let's pray.

Questions to Ask Yourself If You Are a Leader

- A. How do you relate to the privileges God has given you? (Mal. 1:1-5)

- B. How do you treat the “little things”? (Mal. 1:6-11)

- C. Are you bored? Are you joyful? (Mal. 1:12-13)

- D. What do you look like when you are alone? (Mal. 2:1-3)

- E. Are you willing to say and do all that the Bible requires? (Mal. 2:4-9)

- F. How are you treating those closest to you? (Mal. 2:10-16)