

Priests and their Duties

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Why Learn About Priests?

As we read in our lessons, the very first thing said, was “And now, O Priests, this commandment is for you” (Mal. 2:1). Why should people other than priests care about what follows in this chapter? It does kind of sound like it is directed to the priests. This certainly is directed at priests, but the chapter also applies to people more broadly. Even though the chapter certainly teaches us about spiritual principles that apply to everyone, there is a benefit to learning about the job of a priest. Priests and the laity (a term used for the *people* of the congregation) have jobs they perform for the functioning of the Lord’s church on earth. By better understanding what the priest’s job is, we can better understand the laity’s job and how we work together.

Let’s begin by talking about a priest’s over-arching job description: “Priests ought to teach the people, and to lead them by truths to the good of life” (HD 318). They are to do this from a love for the salvation of souls (see AC 10796; Charity 160; TCR 422). But where is this truth that priests are supposed to teach? The Word! We read in *True Christian Religion*:

The church is in accordance with its doctrine, and that **doctrine is from the Word**; nevertheless it is not doctrine but soundness and purity of doctrine, consequently the understanding of the Word, that establishes the church. Neither is it doctrine, but a faith and life in accordance with doctrine, that establishes and constitutes the special church in the individual man. (TCR 245)

A good priest will teach people from the Word and lead people to the Lord and thus heaven. He will do this from a love of saving souls. Through teaching people truths from the Word, people are able to see what the Lord says about how to live their lives. Truths from the Word are timeless and will help inform people on how to conduct themselves as children growing up, as parents, as employees. The Word even informs how we search for marriage on earth,

philosophies of education, science, and politics. A good priest will teach the truth that can then be used to help them lead a good life in all these other facets of life.

Priests are Duty Bound to the Lord

Nobody likes to be told when they are doing something wrong. Nobody likes to be reminded of something they know they should do, but haven't been doing. This is true in many different professions and for priests its no different. Think of the doctor who tells you that you really do need to cut some beloved food out of your diet for your health. Or a physical therapist who tells you that you really do need to consistently stretch and strengthen your muscles to avoid injury in the future. Many of us *know* that we need to do those things, but sometimes it takes hearing it out loud for it to sink in and start doing it. The same is true with many spiritual ailments too. Often we *know* they are evil, but it takes hearing it from someone else before we can kick a bad habit.

Think of how dangerous it would be if doctors didn't tell you when sick for fear you would be upset. This same pattern holds with priests. Also from our lessons, we read in *Ezekiel* that the Lord set watchmen for the people. These watchmen would stand watch and make sure that no enemies were coming. If they saw enemies coming, but did not warn the people, then the watchman would be responsible for the harm that was done. We also read in the Heavenly Doctrine that in the internal sense, this is more particularly referring to the role priests have (see Ezekiel 33:2-6 and PP 156).

Sometimes it may *feel* like priests are practically giddy with excitement to tell people all things that they are doing wrong. But this couldn't be further from the truth. The case today is not as different from the stories in the Word as people may think. Consistently throughout the Word, priests and prophets can be seen to be reluctant to carry out their duty from the Lord. Some well-known examples might include Balaam *wanting* to curse Israel for money, but

needing to say what the Lord said. Jonah is another great example, he literally fled the country trying to avoid doing his duty.

Jeremiah is also an excellent example of a prophet who was *not* eager to tell the people what the Lord wanted him to say. From his very first call—like Moses before him—he made excuses why it shouldn't be him (see Jer. 1:7). Times were not easy for Jeremiah, he was sent to proclaim the Word of the Lord and told to:

Stand in the court of the Lord's house, and speak to all the cities of Judah, ... all the words that I command you to speak to them. Do not diminish a word. Perhaps everyone will listen and turn from his evil way, **that I may relent** concerning the calamity which I purpose to bring on them because of the evil of their doings. (Jer. 26:1-3)

But, the people do not react well and threaten to kill him. The Lord is concerned with our eternal salvation. He wants us to be in heaven with Him and that is why we were given the Word. And remember, a good priest shares that concern for souls and salvation.

Connected to the idea that Priests are bound to the Lord, is that they are also supposed to represent the Lord. We are told that, "Because the priests represented the Lord, who alone fights on man's behalf, their duties are called military service" (AC 1664:7). Thus, we are told further, "the priesthood is a military service, but against falsities and evils" (AE 734:14).

The Priesthood Is Ordained by the Lord NOT People

Despite having clear guidelines about what makes a good priest, for as long as there has been a priesthood, there have been bad priests. A consistent theme throughout the Word and the Doctrine is that priests make mistakes, and that on a personal level and societal level, things are worse for it. But lest we think that because there can be bad priests, that we should get rid of the priesthood, the Lord makes clear in His Second Coming that a priesthood ought to exist.

We are told:

There must therefore be governors to keep the assemblages of men in order, who should be skilled in the law, wise, and who fear God. There must also be order among the

governors, lest anyone, from caprice or ignorance, should permit evils which are contrary to order, and thereby destroy it. ... Governors over those things with men which relate to heaven, or over ecclesiastical affairs, are called priests, and their office is called the priesthood (HD 313-314).

Like was said in our readings from Malachi: “For the lips of a priest should keep knowledge, And people should seek the law from his mouth; For he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts” (Mal. 2:7). A good priest should study the Word, not for his own pride or reputation, or to grind an axe, but that he may instruct people in what the Lord teaches in His Word.

Priests are Bound to Teach Doctrine from the Word

So we read in the Lord’s Heavenly Doctrine that “With respect to the priests, they ought to teach men the way to heaven, and also to lead them; they ought to teach them according to the doctrine of their church from the Word, and to lead them to live according to it” (HD 315). One of the accusations in the prophet Malachi is that the priests have shown partiality in the law. Despite reading the Lord’s Word, they make excuses for people where the Lord does not. Despite being a messenger for the Lord, they instead make exceptions for friends and family that break the Lord’s laws. As we read, the priests who do this will have dung spread in their faces.

We as priests need to take the job very seriously. By not doing our job as the Lord tells us to, we can confuse others and make them stumble. The Lord strongly warns against this many times. He says in *Jeremiah*:

“Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you. They make you worthless; They speak a vision of their own heart, Not from the mouth of the Lord. They continually say to those who despise Me, ‘The Lord has said, “You shall have peace”’; And to everyone who walks according to the dictates of his own heart, **they say, ‘No evil shall come upon you.’**” (Jer. 23:16-17)

When priests simply tell people what they want to hear and don’t lead them to what the Lord needs us to hear, people get hurt. Not just a temporary pain, but deep spiritual damage can be done. But if that weren’t enough, as in *Malachi* and *Ezekiel*, there are warnings to the priests

that if through *their* leading, people are not led to the Lord, but *away* from him, they will be guilty and punished. If not for selfless reasons, then at least for selfish reasons, the priest should tread carefully when leading, lest through his teaching he draw people away from the Lord.

Seeking the Law from a Priest

As with many things, there are two sides to every coin. Yes, priests can certainly lead people astray when they don't do their job. However, the laity also have a responsibility to read the Word for themselves. The Lord wants us to hear the Word so we can change. We are told that "People caught up in evils and the accompanying falsities cannot be healed by the Word, because they do not read it" (AR 936). We need to hear from the Lord. Everyone needs to hear from the Lord. If the priests aren't leading from the Word, by reading the Word for ourselves, people can guard against false teaching.

However, another caution the Lord gives us in *Isaiah*, alerts us to the fact that sometimes it is not *just* the priest who wants to teach something different than the Word. We are told that the Israelites were a rebellious people and would not listen to the Law, saying: "to the seers, "Do not see," And to the prophets, "Do not prophesy to us right things; Speak to us smooth things, prophesy deceits" (Isa. 30:9-10). In *Jeremiah*, a similar tune is sung: "The prophets prophesy falsely, And the priests rule by their own power; And My people love to have it so. (Jer. 5:30-31)

Both priests and laity have a responsibility to go to the Word and earnestly listen for what the Lord wants us to do. A good priest will strengthen himself in the Lord to teach His Word, even when it is unpopular. A good priest will keep in mind the Lord's words in *John*: "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you" (John 15:18). A good lay person will also strengthen themselves in the Lord and turn to His Word for guidance. A good lay person will not ask the priests to just say smooth things, but will seek the Law from his mouth.

Finally, we can all strive to be a watchman for the Lord. Though the priesthood is especially called to do this, we all need to speak the Lord's Word fearlessly and boldly As the Lord tells us in *Isaiah*: "For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not be quiet. ... On your walls, O Jerusalem, I have set watchmen; all the day and all the night they shall never be silent" (Isa. 62:1, 6). *Amen.*

Lessons

And now, O priests, this commandment is for you. ²If you will not hear, And if you will not take it to heart, To give glory to My name,” Says the LORD of hosts, “I will send a curse upon you, And I will curse your blessings. Yes, I have cursed them already, Because you do not take it to heart. ³“Behold, I will rebuke your descendants And spread dung on your faces, The dung of your solemn feasts; And one will take you away with it. ⁴**Then you shall know that I have sent this commandment to you,** That My covenant with Levi may continue,” Says the LORD of hosts. ⁵“My covenant was with him, one of life and peace, And I gave them to him that he might fear Me; So he feared Me And was reverent before My name. ⁶The law of truth was in his mouth, And injustice was not found on his lips. He walked with Me in peace and equity, And turned many away from iniquity. ⁷“**For the lips of a priest should keep knowledge, And people should seek the law from his mouth;** For he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts. ⁸But you have departed from the way; You have caused many to stumble at the law. You have corrupted the covenant of Levi,” Says the LORD of hosts. ⁹“Therefore I also have made you contemptible and base Before all the people, Because you have not kept My ways But have shown partiality in the law. (Mal. 2:1-9)

Son of man, speak to your people and say to them, If I bring the sword upon a land, and the people of the land take a man from among them, and make him their watchman, ³ and if he sees the sword coming upon the land and blows the trumpet and warns the people, ⁴ then if anyone who hears the sound of the trumpet does not take warning, and the sword comes and takes him away, his blood shall be upon his own head. ⁵ He heard the sound of the trumpet and did not take warning; his blood shall be upon himself. But if he had taken warning, he would have saved his life. ⁶ But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, so that the people are not warned, and the sword comes and takes any one of them, that person is taken away in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at the watchman's hand. (Ez. 33:2-6)

The quote below is the internal sense of Ezekiel 33.

Those who are instructed by the preacher concerning falsities and do not take heed, perish; when the preacher sees falsities and does not give instruction concerning them, he perishes. The same is true of everyone who teaches doctrine, when he teaches and is not heard, or when he does not teach. (PP 156)