

# The Standard for Shepherds

Malachi 2:1–9

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## Introduction

Well we return this morning to our series in the Book of Malachi, so please turn with me in your Bibles to Malachi chapter 2. And follow along as I read our text for this morning, Malachi chapter 2, verses 1 to 9.

It is virtually impossible to overstate the importance of integrity in the lives of those who lead God's people. Every one of the people of God are called to an unimaginably holy calling, living each day before the face of omniscient holiness. But those charged by God to lead and guide His people—in teaching them His Word, in shepherding them in His ways—bear a double responsibility. The Apostle Paul—in both his first letter to Timothy and his letter to Titus—includes a list of lofty qualifications for those who serve as elders of Christ's church; and both of those lists begin with the qualification of being *above reproach*. The Apostle James issues stern warning to those who preach the Word in James 3:1: “Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a *stricter judgment*.”

Why is the standard for leaders so high? Why is the judgment stricter? Well, because as go the leaders, so go the people. Zechariah 13:7 makes that very point: if you strike the shepherd, the sheep will be scattered. Leaders, in any arena, set the pace for those whom they lead; they set the example that others may follow. And so, among the people of God, Satan can do more damage by undermining one pastor than by undermining a hundred members. He can undermine a hundred members *by* undermining one pastor. In wartime, if you can capture the enemy's medic, you severely weaken the rest of the battalion, because now every wound becomes potentially life-threatening, since it can't be treated. Pastors and elders are, in a certain sense, the spiritual medics for the soldiers of Christ's church, treating spiritual infirmity and disease by the skillful ministry of God's Word.

If you can lead just one leader astray, you can cause the hundreds—and sometimes even the thousands—he leads to stumble. Churches can be full, and yet inoculated by the false comforts of external associations with Christianity—the whole time following incompetent or disqualified pastors straight to destruction. This is why ministerial failure is so especially grieving. And it's why the qualifications for faithful ministers are so strict.

Our passage this morning is an illustration of both (a) the high calling of spiritual leadership, as well as (b) the tragic failure of coming short of that standard, as it materialized in the priests of

Israel in the days of the prophet Malachi. Once again, I remind you of the context for the book. Malachi ministers in the late 400s BC, about 100 years after the southern kingdom of Judah had returned to the land from exile in Babylon. Soon after their return from exile, God sent the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to prophesy great blessings of spiritual renewal and national restoration in Israel.

But by Malachi's day, it had been 80 years since those promises were made, and the people saw no such Messianic renovation. As a result, the nation became disillusioned—both the people and the priests. Their faith in the Lord's promises dwindled. They began to doubt His faithfulness, and so their devotion to Him eroded into apathy. Their hearts were hardened, and even though they celebrated the feasts and offered the sacrifices according to the law, their temple worship practices became little more than going through the motions. As we saw in chapter 1, verses 6 to 14, their worship was worthless—one big charade of empty formalism—devoid of the faith, hope, and love that characterizes the true worship that God receives. And in our sermon on that passage, we examined the marks of the priests' worthless worship.

Our text this morning continues that same prophetic oracle of judgment against these priests. And whereas God, in chapter 1 verses 6 to 14, in a manner lays out His case against these priests for their corrupt worship practices, here in chapter 2 verses 1 to 9, He issues His verdict upon them, finding them guilty, and announcing their sentence. And as you've heard already, it is some of the most severe language in all of Scripture. But it's not without grace. God prosecutes these faithless spiritual leaders so relentlessly, chiefly because He wants to preserve the means by which He is worshiped by those who truly belong to Him by faith.

Now, you say, "Mike, does this text really have anything to do with me, though? This is all about God's standards for the priests of Israel under the Mosaic Covenant. The Church is not Israel. We're in the New Covenant. There are no more priests. Is a passage like this really relevant to me?" And the answer is yes. It's true that the Old Testament priesthood, tied to the Mosaic Covenant, has ceased along with that Covenant. The Book of Hebrews teaches that Jesus Christ is the Great High Priest of the new and better covenant. He is a priest, not according to the order of Aaron and the Levites, but according to the order of Melchizedek. And just as the Mosaic Covenant is obsolete, Hebrews 8:13, so also is the priesthood associated with that covenant obsolete. And so there is no biblical basis for a clerical priesthood in the church. Whether it's Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Anglicanism, Episcopalianism, or whatever—any insistence upon such a priesthood is an affront to and a derogation of the once-for-all, permanent high priestly ministry of Christ.

But that doesn't mean that the New Covenant doesn't have priests! First Peter 2:5 says that all those who partake in the New Covenant are like "living stones, being built up as a spiritual house for a **holy priesthood**, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." In

1 Peter 2:9, Peter tells the church, “You are a chosen race, **a royal priesthood**, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession.” In the Book of Revelation, the Apostle John writes to the seven churches in Asia Minor, and he says in Revelation 1:6 that Christ “has made us to be a kingdom, **priests** to His God and Father.” In chapter 5 verse 10, he calls those Jesus purchased from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation “a kingdom and **priests** to our God.” And so every believer in Jesus in the New Covenant era is a priest. All of us live every day in the Holy Place—in the very presence of God Himself—offering our entire lives as living and holy sacrifices, as our spiritual service of worship (Rom 12:1). And that’s how chapter 1 verses 6 to 14 applied well to us: the entire Christian life is priestly ministry, because the entire Christian life is worship to God through Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

But the passage before us this morning teaches us that the Levitical priests weren’t just temple servants. They weren’t just the mediators who officiated sacrificial offerings and temple worship. We don’t think about it very much, but the Old Covenant priests were also *teachers*. We tend to think that it was only the prophets who were the teachers of the Word, but the priests also had to teach the people concerning the statutes and ordinances of Yahweh. If someone touched something that was unclean, Leviticus 5 says they had to speak to the priest about the proper mode of cleansing. If they had a skin condition, Leviticus 13 and 14 says they were to be examined and instructed by the priests. Leviticus 27 directs the people to the priests for a proper valuation of animals offered as tithes. Deuteronomy 33:10 says of the priests, “They shall *teach* Your ordinances to Jacob, And Your law to Israel.” Even our passage says, Malachi 2:7, “the lips of a priest should preserve knowledge, and men should *seek instruction* from his mouth.”

And even though the New Covenant doesn’t have a clerical priesthood—aside from the fact that we are all called priests—the New Covenant does have teachers of the Word of God. And so a principal application of this text will be to pastors—to the preachers and teachers of God’s Word that Christ has given as gifts to His Church. And that’s good timing, in the Lord’s providence, as we prepare for Shepherds’ Conference. Malachi 2:1–9 is a text that has much to say about the character and the practice of the spiritual leaders of God’s people.

But it’s not *only* relevant for pastors. In the first place, each and every one of you, as the people of God, need to know what a faithful leader looks like, so you can hold your leaders accountable to the standard of Scripture, and so you can pray for God’s grace as we press toward that standard. And even beyond that: you yourselves—each and every one of you—are priests of the New Covenant, and therefore in some measure, you have been entrusted with the responsibility to teach the Word of God to those within your sphere of influence. It may not be that you have a formal teaching role, but you ought to minister the Word of God to one another, even as Ephesians 4:25 calls you to “speak truth each one of you with his neighbor.” Deuteronomy 6:7 calls parents to teach the words of God diligently to your children, speaking of the Scriptures when you sit, and walk, and lie down, and rise up. Colossians 3:16 says you are to “Let the word

of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another.” You are priests who teach!

And in that way, this oracle of judgment against the unfaithful priests of the late 400s BC becomes a word of admonition to Christians in 21<sup>st</sup>-century America—and especially to those of us who occupy a place of spiritual leadership. It speaks especially to the standard for the shepherds—for those who are entrusted to lead God’s people. And we’ll seek to reap the benefits of that word of admonition by examining it along **four headings**.

### **I. The Priest’s Standard (vv. 4–7)**

The first is **the priest’s standard**. And we see that in verses 4 through 7. God says, “‘Then you will know that I have sent this commandment to you, that My covenant may continue with Levi,’ says Yahweh of hosts. <sup>5</sup>‘My covenant with him was one of life and peace, and I gave them to him as an object of reverence; so he revered Me and stood in awe of My name. <sup>6</sup>True instruction was in his mouth and unrighteousness was not found on his lips; he walked with Me in peace and uprightness, and he turned many back from iniquity. <sup>7</sup>For the lips of a priest should preserve knowledge, and men should seek instruction from his mouth; for he is the messenger of Yahweh of hosts.’”

It’s frequently said that these verses represent the most lofty and exalted estimation of the Levitical priesthood anywhere in Scripture. It speaks of the exemplary priesthood—the priesthood as God had intended it to be. And so it becomes a fitting description of **the priest’s standard** throughout all the generations of the Mosaic Covenant.

God speaks of His “covenant with Levi.” And “Levi,” here, is representative of the priests as a whole. Scripture doesn’t explicitly record a covenant made with the priesthood, but it does refer to it in several places: Nehemiah 13:29 speaks of “the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites.” Jeremiah 33:20–22 references God’s covenant “with the Levitical priests, My ministers.” Deuteronomy 33 speaks of Levi, who “observed Your word, and kept Your covenant” (vv. 8–9). Exodus 32:29 calls the Levites to “Dedicate yourselves today to Yahweh...in order that He may bestow a blessing upon you today.” The language of *dedication* for *blessing* is covenant language.

But Numbers 25 figures perhaps most prominently. After Phinehas killed the Israelite man who married the Moabite woman—which God says turned away His wrath and made atonement for the sons of Israel—God says, in verses 12 and 13, “Behold, I give him My covenant of peace; and it shall be for him and his descendants after him, a covenant of a perpetual priesthood.” And the lexical parallels between Numbers 25 and Malachi 1 and 2 are striking. A lot of repeated vocabulary points to a connection between these two passages.

But the point of speaking of God’s covenant with Levi is to refer to that “whole arrangement that made [the Levites] priests in Israel” (McComiskey, 1315). The covenant with Levi is the body of the Mosaic law that made the Levites priests—along with all the particulars that accompanied priestly service. The point is: this is what the priesthood was to be, in its most pristine form. This is **the priest’s standard**. It’s what it means for the leaders of God’s people to deal in covenant faithfulness in the fulfillment of their office before God.

And that **standard** is laid out for us in **four duties**. The priest’s first duty is that he was, above all, to be a worshiper. Verse 5 says God gave Levi His covenant “as an object of *reverence*; so he *revered Me and stood in awe of My name*.” You see, Levi was faithful in the way in which he carried out the Lord’s statutes and ordinances for Israel’s temple worship. He wasn’t flippant, or lax, or apathetic about his responsibility to minister in the holy presence of God, to represent the people to God by intercession, and to represent God to the people by instruction. Every I was dotted, and every T was crossed. Levi saw to it that Yahweh would be worshiped in the precise way that He had prescribed in His Word.

But it wasn’t just that Levi was a scrupulous rule-follower by his native constitution. It wasn’t just that his personality lent him to pay attention to detail. No, at the root of Levi’s devotion to carrying out the ordinances of God in scrupulous purity, was awe for God’s name. Levi was a worshiper in his heart before he was a worshiper with his hands.

And that teaches us, friends, that the absolute foundation for faithful service to God in leadership of His people is a God-centered fear of the Lord. It is a humble, submissive reverence for His holy name. You see, friends, before you would serve God or minister to God’s people, you must bow in wonder before the Sovereign Majesty of the Ancient of Days. Your soul must be gripped by the glory of the King of the Ages. This is the God who spoke the galaxies into existence by His word! This is the God who bows Job to the dust as He speaks from the whirlwind! This is the God of the ten plagues, who parted the Red Sea, who drowned the world’s greatest military superpower by the staff of an 80 year-old leader of slaves! This is the God who quaked upon Mount Sinai in thunder and lightning and smoke—the God who split the earth open and swallowed Korah and his band of rebels into hell. This is the God who is a consuming fire, whose name is jealous, whose eyes are too pure to look upon evil, and who destroys both soul and body in hell! You are called, as priests of the New Covenant, to minister before the open face of *this* God. And so your first and great duty—every morning—is to *stand in awe* of the name of this God, to *tremble* at His Word.

And not just for the terror and dread of being in the presence of One so infinitely holy, though that’s necessary. But then to remember that this awesome God is *your* God; that He has come near to you in love and in grace through the Gospel of His Son; so near that He has even

assumed your frail and finite humanity in Christ, to bear your griefs and carry your sorrows, to be pierced for your transgressions and crushed for your iniquities. And it is to let those melting considerations of the Gospel of the blessed God move you to adoring love and worship, to satisfaction in this God, who captures your affections and wins you over to a life of sacrificial service. The one who leads others to worship must first of all be a worshiper, who reveres God and stands in awe of His name.

Second, the priest was to be a teacher. Verses 6: “True *instruction* was in his mouth and unrighteousness was not found on his lips.” Verse 7: “For the *lips* of a priest should preserve *knowledge*, and men should *seek instruction* from his mouth; for he is the *messenger* of Yahweh of hosts.” And this is a striking verse, because we’re used to hearing that the prophets were the “messengers of Yahweh.” But here that title is applied to the priests. Technically, it was the priests who were tasked with instructing Israel about leading a life of worship according to the Torah. It was when they failed in this duty that prophets were commissioned to turn God’s people back to faithfulness, even as Malachi was doing.

But we see this throughout the Old Testament. In Leviticus 10 verse 11, Yahweh spoke to Aaron, whose sons would be the priests, and commanded them “to *teach* the sons of Israel all the statutes which Yahweh has spoken to them through Moses.” Deuteronomy 17:10 commands Israel, “You shall be careful to observe according to all that they [i.e., the priests] *teach* you.” If God’s people are “destroyed for *lack* of knowledge,” as Hosea 4:6 says, Malachi says “the lips of a priest should *preserve* knowledge.”

Applying this to the priests of the New Covenant, this teaches us the central importance of biblical accuracy in the pastor’s preaching and teaching, as well as in the member’s regular discussions of the Word of God with fellow believers. We are to be ruthlessly biblical! We cannot play fast and loose with the text of Scripture. The New Covenant minister is not an orator, who entertains his audience with flowery rhetoric, sharp wit, endearing humor, and relevant anecdotes. The New Covenant minister is a herald. He has no message of his own. He does not add to his Master’s message any of his own ideas. He is merely the instrument of the one who sends him—the mouthpiece who will proclaim the message he has been commissioned with, precisely as he has received it. The orator was *results*-driven. His job was to concoct whatever message would produce the desired effect in his audience. The herald is *obedience*-driven, whose success is measured only in how faithfully he communicates the message that has been entrusted to him.

Third, the priest was to be a disciple. Verse 6 also says of the ideal priest: “he walked with Me in peace and uprightness.” The biblical leader isn’t merely in awe of God’s majesty and able to teach rightly. He is also a practitioner of what he preaches. He is one who walks with God, who

follows after Him, who pursues constant, ever-deepening communion with Him. It's not just doctrine; it's devotion!

There are far too many “professional Christians” in leadership positions who know their stuff theoretically, but who simply have no idea how to put one foot in front of the other in the path of discipleship, who wouldn't know piety if it smacked them in the face. But those who truly understand sound doctrine are *shaped* by that sound doctrine. Sound doctrine issues in sound living. In 1 Timothy 6:3, Paul mentions both doctrine in accordance with “sound words,” and “the doctrine conforming to godliness.” Those aren't different doctrines! The inevitable fruit of sound words is godliness, Christlikeness, sanctification, progress in grace. If your exegesis and your theology and your church history and your apologetics don't make you more like *Jesus*—and if they don't make you want to spend more time with Jesus, as the deer pants for the water brooks (Ps 42:1)—then, 1 Corinthians 8:2: you don't know whatever you think you know as you ought to know it.

Robert Murray M'Cheyne famously said of the church he pastored, “The greatest need of my people is my own holiness.” The greatest need of the church today is to be shepherded by ministers who have manifestly *been* with the Lord! who smell like Galilee! whose faces shine like Moses' with the residual glory of God's face, because they've spent so much time with Him in the secret place—in prayer, in meditation upon Scripture, in reflection on the character of God, in the anguish of the mortification of sin!

And insofar as each one of you is a priest of the New Covenant, the greatest need of the church today is to have fellowship with fellow-believers who have manifestly *been* with the Lord! The greatest benefit you could be to your brothers and sisters in GraceLife is to show them Christ! And the only way you look like Christ is to walk with Him. The faithful shepherd walks with God in peace and uprightness. He's not just trafficking in religion; he lives out His theology in personal communion with God in Christ by the Holy Spirit, day by day.

And then, fourthly, the priest was to be a shepherd. Verse 6 again: “He walked with Me in peace and uprightness; and he turned many back from iniquity.” You see, the result of a holy life, pursuing communion with God, is other people's holy lives, pursuing communion with God. The sanctification of the shepherd results in the sanctification of the sheep. When a man is a worshiper, a teacher, and a disciple—when he stands in awe of God, studies to show himself approved, and sits in the counsel of Christ—those whom he's responsible to lead are turned back from sin. They are convicted by his doctrine, and they are wooed by his devotion. The inevitable fruit of such a life is the spiritual growth of the people of God.

And friends, this is ultimately what we are after in ministry—whether pastor or people. “We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may

present every man *complete in Christ*.” Just as *we* are not satisfied with being mere theoreticians, neither are we satisfied with God’s *people* being mere theoreticians. Faithful shepherds long for the sheep they serve to know the pleasant life of holiness, the victory of forsaking sin and living in purity, the joys of a heart divorced from sin and the allurements of this world and wedded to Christ, their pearl of great price.

I don’t want to just play church! I don’t want you to just put in your time on Sundays, where you fill your head with Christian trivia and pretend that everything in your life is just peachy, all the while your home is mess and your heart is in love and at peace with sin. No, I want to see the chains broken, so that sin has no hold on your heart! I want you to be rid of sin’s bitterness and filth! And I want you to taste the sweetness of the pure springs of holiness! I want you to have newer and clearer disclosures of the face of Christ to the eyes of your heart. *That’s* what church is for: to turn many back from iniquity. To kill sin, and to lay hold of holiness!

This is the **standard** for the faithful priest—whether the Levites under the Old Covenant, or the Melchizedekians under the New Covenant. A worshiper, a teacher, a disciple, and a shepherd.

## II. The Priests’ Failures (vv. 2, 8–9)

But the priests of Malachi’s day were not living up to that standard. That brings us, **secondly**, to **the priests’ failures**. Hear the marked contrast in verse 8: “*But as for you...*” “This was the standard, but as for *you*.” And then we get a summary comment at the end of verse 8: “You have corrupted the covenant of Levi,” says Yahweh of hosts.” Yahweh’s “covenant with Levi was one of life and peace,” but these priests have corrupted that covenant. They had failed to uphold their responsibilities as outlined in the Law of Moses.

And just as we could group the priest’s standard into four duties, we can summarize **the priests’ failures** into four failures. Whereas the priest was to be a worshiper of Yahweh, revering Him and standing in awe of His name, these priests, number one, failed to esteem God’s glory. Verse 2 says, “...if you do not take it to heart to give *honor* to My *name*...” Which clearly implies that they were *not* taking it to heart to honor God’s name! Indeed, chapter 1 verse 6, God says, “If I am a father, where is My *honor*?” He calls them, “O priests who *despise* My name.” “Despise” is the term *bazah*; it means “to regard lightly,” to not perceive the weight or the gravity of something. You see, rather than regarding God as weighty and grave and worthy of reverence and honor, they treated Him as if He were insignificant and common and light. They spoke to Him flippantly. They complained about their duties of temple service. And they offered unworthy sacrifices. “Oh? That one has a broken leg? Can’t sell him. Give it to God for the sacrifice!”

And note: they were not just “not honoring Him.” They were “not *taking it to heart* to give honor to Him.” It is ministerial **failure**, friends—perhaps the chief ministerial failure—to be devoid of the burden on your heart for the name of God to be exalted, and sanctified, and lifted up, and honored, and treasured. This is not just talk about God’s glory, or preaching about God’s glory, but it is that ache of the soul for God to get what He’s worthy of in His people. It’s what the Apostle Paul says in Philippians 1:19–21, as he sits in prison awaiting trial before Nero, that he will rejoice, because his earnest expectation and hope is that Christ will be magnified in his body, whether by life or by death. “Whether I live or whether I die, the Romans can’t take my joy from me, because my joy is in the magnification of Christ. And He *will* be magnified in me, because for me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. To me, Christ is more satisfying than all that life can offer and all that death can take!” And if a minister doesn’t have that—if the bottom of his joy is something other than to see himself decrease and to see Christ increase—he is a failure.

Failure number two. The priest was to be a teacher. But these priests failed to teach God’s Word. Verse 2 says, “If you do not listen,” which means they were not listening to God’s Word—not studying the Scriptures and heeding God’s voice, which is absolutely essential if you’re going to teach God’s Word. And so verse 8 says that their instruction has “caused many to stumble,” and verse 9 says they “are showing partiality in the instruction.” They are not cutting a straight course in the Word of God, preaching it with accuracy and letting the chips fall where they may. They were holding back the harder words from those they didn’t want to offend, likely in fear of losing their support—financial or otherwise. Micah 3:11 described the same thing among the leaders of Israel 300 years prior: “Her leaders pronounce judgment for a bribe, *Her priests instruct for a price* and her prophets divine for money.”

It is not just **failure**, fellow ministers, but the prostitution of your calling, to withhold needed correction from the people of God because you’re afraid that they’ll be mad at you, or might stop giving. Herald the Word of God as it’s been given, because you esteem God’s name and you believe the Lord of the church must be heard in His church! But herald the Word as it’s been given, also because you love God’s people, and you realize that His Word is what is best for them! It is better for someone to be offended with you than for them to rest secure in their sin. Paul tells Timothy, in 1 Timothy 5:21, “I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of His chosen angels, to maintain these principles without bias, doing nothing in a spirit of partiality.” Preach the truth. Trust God with the results.

Failure number three. The priest was to be a disciple by walking with God in a life of devoted holiness. But these priests failed to walk in God’s ways. Verse 8: “But as for you, you have turned aside from the way.” And verse 9: “you are not keeping My ways.” They had left off the pursuit of their own sanctification.

And then, failure number four. While the ideal priest was to be a shepherd, guiding the Lord's people to turn away from sin, these priests failed to sanctify God's people. Verse 8 says, "You have caused many to *stumble* by the instruction." The whole reason God has given you to be a minister to His people is so that you would have a sanctifying effect on them—so that you would lead them in paths of righteousness, even as the Chief Shepherd does. And yet by their carelessness and flippancy with the temple worship, these priests led the people of God into corruption. They led them into sin by making them a party to their corrupt worship.

These priests failed to esteem God's glory, to teach God's Word, to walk in God's ways, and to sanctify God's people.

### III. God's Judgment (vv. 2–3, 9)

And how does God respond to the priests' failure? That brings us to our **third point**: namely, the **God's judgment**. And this judgment comes in three broad categories, which we find in verses 2, 3, and 9.

In the first place, God will curse them. Look again at verse 2: "If you do not listen, and if you do not take it to heart to give honor to My name," says Yahweh of hosts, "then I will send the *curse* upon you and I will *curse* your blessings; and indeed, I have cursed them already, because you are not taking it to heart." God says He will curse the priests' blessings, which is really an astounding thing to say, because the priests were in the business of blessing. We see that in Numbers 6, where God famously commands Aaron and his sons, the priests, verse 23: "Thus you shall *bless* the sons of Israel. You shall say to them: Yahweh *bless* you, and keep you; Yahweh make His face shine on you, and be gracious to you; Yahweh lift up His countenance on you, and give you peace. So they shall invoke *My name* on the sons of Isarel, and I then will bless them."

The priests were to be the mediators of divine blessing upon the people. One commentator wrote, "In the most general sense, people went to priests for blessing. ... It was their job, on request, to say blessings for the people who came to them" (McComiskey, 1311). For God to turn their blessings into curses would be to take the very purpose for their existence and bring it entirely to nothing. One commentator says it would be "to undermine and overthrow the whole fabric of institutional religion in Israel" (Verhoef, 239). Just think about the Aaronic blessing that I just read from Numbers 6. It's a blessing of God's protection (the Lord keep you), His favor (and be gracious to you), His presence (make His face shine), and peace. For God to curse that blessing would mean that when the priests prayed for God's protection, favor, presence, and peace for His people, their prayers would result in neglect rather than protection, just punishment rather than favor, abandonment rather than fellowship, and misery rather than peace (McComiskey, 1312).

Do you remember in Matthew 6:23, when Jesus said that the eye is the lamp of the body, and therefore to be on guard against lust—do you remember how He put it? He said, “If your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!” In the same way, if your blessings are curses, how great is that curse! The only reason you exist, as a priest, is to bless God’s people. And yet, because of your faithlessness, God will turn your every effort to benefit His people into harm for His people. It’s bone-chilling!

Second, God will not only curse them, but He will rebuke them. Look at the first part of verse 3: “Behold, I am going to rebuke your offspring.” And literally, the term for “offspring” there is the term *seed*. And it certainly could refer to the descendants of the priests, as the NAS translates it there. And I think that’s most likely. But I also wonder if God intended it as something of a double entendre to refer to the seed of their crops as well. Chapter 3 verse 11 mentions “the devourer” that God has already sent upon them to “destroy the fruits of the ground.” God has caused the land’s produce to be slim, so that the nation was in a time of economic depression. And so He may be saying here in 2:3 that He’s going to continue that.

But as I said, I do think the most likely reading is that He is threatening these faithless priests with the extinction of their family line. This was a common form of divine judgment in the Old Testament, and it was a cause of great shame and loss of social standing. And more than that: because the priestly office was hereditary, passing down through the line of Levi, such a loss of lineage would not only be shameful; it would be tantamount to the abolition of the priestly office itself. And I think we can understand something of that. It would be as if a church’s leadership was so wayward, so faithless, that God decided He would never plant another church from that church. Or that He would never send another missionary from that church. Or that He would never raise up another pastor from that church. And that doubtless has been the judgment that has fallen upon some corrupt ministries.

And then thirdly: God will not only curse them and rebuke them, but He will humiliate them. And this is truly one of the most shocking verses in all of the Old Testament. Verse 3: “And I will spread dung on your faces, the dung of your feasts, and you will be taken away with it.” And verse 9: “So I also have made you despised and abased before all the people.” The term “dung,” translated “refuse” in the NASB, is the Hebrew word *peresh*, and it refers to “the undigested contents of the stomach” (Hill, 201), and sometimes to the intestines and the fecal matter that was in them (McComiskey, 1314). The term is used throughout the Book of Leviticus, where the priests were instructed to take this portion of the sacrificial animals—along with their hide, flesh, head, legs, and entrails—and burn them outside the camp, where the unclean things were to be disposed of.

The priests were to be the very illustration of ceremonial cleanness, picturing God’s holiness and worthiness to Israel—in what they wore, in the places they ministered: everything had to be performed to Yahweh’s exact specifications, because He is a holy God and He is worthy to be worshiped precisely how He demands. But these priests were treating the temple service of God as an unclean thing, as a common or profane thing, in the way that they were offering defiled food on the altar. And so He says, “You’re offering unclean sacrifices! You’re making the temple service of God unclean! Well, you know what? I’m going to make *you* unclean, in the most shameful way there is! I’m going to take the *most* unclean aspect of your duties—the refuse, the dung of your blemished sacrifices—and I’m going to shove your faces in it!” One commentator said, “I will make visible on your faces the shame of your crimes” (Baldwin, 233).

And the point of saying that it’s the dung of the *feasts* is that there would be more sacrifices offered during the festivals of the Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles than during the daily sacrifices. Which means that the excrement from those animals would be at the highest volume. God is not playing. “All the pretended dignity of your empty formalism will be stripped from you! You despised My name by presenting defiled food on My altar,” chapter 1 verse 6. “Now, instead of my covenant of life and peace, I make you despised and abased!” This is the language of degradation and dishonor. Think of it: from the house of God—from the holy of holies—to the dung heap!

The imagery of burning refuse is indeed the language of Gehenna—the Valley of the Sons of Hinnom, that ravine south of Jerusalem where trash was continually burning—which Jesus used as a picture of hell. You know what this shows us? It shows us that vocational ministry never saved any man from divine punishment. Just because you bear the title of pastor, or elder, or missionary, it doesn’t mean that you’ve not deceived yourself. At the very end of Pilgrim’s Progress, the self-deceived false-professor Ignorance crosses the river of death, thinking to be admitted to the Celestial City. But because he is not a true believer, he is cast into the door in the side of the hill—a door Christian and Hopeful had seen when they spied out the City from the Delectable Mountains, a door the Shepherds called “a by-way to Hell, a way that Hypocrites go in at.” And the second to last line of Pilgrim’s Progress is Bunyan himself speaking. And he says, “Then I saw that there was a Way to Hell, even from the Gates of Heaven, as well as from the City of Destruction.”

Oh, dear people: God takes His worship seriously! And if we, by our man-centeredness, by our careless instruction, by our disregard for personal holiness, cause the people of God to stumble, as verse 8 says, remember Jesus’ words in Matthew 18:6: “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.” And for you who are inclined to hear such things and think harshly of God for His **judgment**, do you think harshly of Jesus for

that statement? Or do you realize that His severity with the stumbling blocks is His compassion and kindness to the little ones who are caused to stumble?

You see, it is an expression of love to Israel—"I have loved you, says Yahweh"—to rebuke false teachers and corrupt spiritual leaders like this. The whole purpose of this stern word is, verse 4, "that My covenant may *continue* with Levi." He wants to preserve a pure priesthood, so that true worshipers will worship Him in spirit and truth. God speaks so severely to faithless leaders, because faithless leaders can repent! And if they do, that would be great—not only for the leaders themselves, but for the people of God whom they lead.

### **Conclusion: Christ's Fulfillment**

And that leads me to a final point. We've seen the priest's standard, these priests' failures, and God's judgment. But consider with me for just a moment, number four, **Christ's fulfillment**. What should the faithful Israelite in Malachi's day do with this message of judgment against the priests? "Ugh! These priests are such phonies! God has obviously forsaken this nation, so I will too! We're already a colony of the Persian Empire; maybe I'll move to Susa and worship the Persian gods!"

No! The proper response to ministerial failure is not to "deconstruct" and "apostatize" and abandon the faith. Leaders should be trustworthy, for sure, but your trust is never *ultimately* to be in your leaders! The "resting place" for your faith is to be Christ alone, "the ever-living One"! When His ministers fail, that's cause for grief and mourning; but it's all the more reason to raise our eyes *higher* than our shepherds to Christ, the Chief Shepherd, who is worthy of all our trust! "Behold, I lay in Zion a choice stone, a precious corner stone, and he who believes in Him will not be disappointed!"

In the same way, the faithful believers in Malachi's day were to hear this message from God's prophet grieve over their faithlessness. But ultimately, they were to let their priests' failures propel them to look for the perfect Mediator who was to come. "Oh, Yahweh! In this day of treachery, where is the righteous, covenant-keeping Priest, in whom we can place our trust and not be disappointed? Where is the One who will stand in the counsel of God and be taught of You, that He might teach us Your Word in purity? Where is the One who will practice righteousness and live an uncorrupted life of devotion to You? Where is the One who will restore those who stumble, and deliver them unto salvation?" Does that sound like anybody you know?

**Christ** is the **fulfillment** of all of these things! What was the priest's standard, according to verses 5 to 7? He was to be a worshiper, a teacher, a disciple, and a shepherd. Jesus is the perfect worshiper! He perfectly loved God His Father with all His heart, soul, mind, and strength. His

food, John 4:34, was to do the will of the One who had sent Him. He stood in awe of the name of God, as Luke 5:16 records that “Jesus...would often slip away to the wilderness and pray.”

He is the perfect teacher! He is the eternal Word, John chapter 1. The only begotten God, forever in the bosom of the Father, who has explained the Father that no one has ever seen. He said in John 13:13, “You call Me *Teacher* and Lord, and you are right, for so I am.” He spoke with authority, and people wondered at the gracious words that fell from His lips. He is the Great Prophet who was to come, who expounded the Word of God in perfect purity, and instructed His people in righteousness!

Jesus is the perfect disciple! The third Servant Song of Isaiah, chapter 50 verses 4 to 11, begins like this: “The Lord Yahweh has given Me *the tongue of disciples*, That I may know how to sustain the weary one with a word. He awakens Me morning by morning, He awakens My ear to listen as a *disciple*.” And He followed faithfully! He was holy, harmless, undefiled, separated from sinners. He committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth. He was the One who *fulfilled* all righteousness, the One by whose obedience the many are constituted righteous!

And therefore Jesus is the perfect shepherd! And oh, you who know Him this morning have no need for me to prove that to you! He is the *Good Shepherd*, who lays down His life for His sheep, John 10. He is the *Great Shepherd*, whom the God of peace brought up from the dead, Hebrews 13. He is the *Chief Shepherd*, who confers upon the faithful the unfading crown of glory, 1 Peter 5. He is the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls, 1 Peter 2:25, who guides you in paths of righteousness for His name’s sake, who protects you from the enemy of your souls, who defends you against all of the accuser’s malice! Micah 5:2 has that wonderful prophecy of the Messiah’s birth in Bethlehem, but listen to how it puts it: “Out of you [Bethlehem] shall come forth a ruler who will *shepherd* My people Israel.” And then verse 4: “And He will arise and *shepherd His flock* in the strength of Yahweh, in the majesty of the name of Yahweh His God. And they [His people] will *remain*,”—He will give us everlasting life—“because at that time He will be great to the ends of the earth! This One will be our peace!” (“My covenant with him was *life and peace*.”)

Oh friends: Jesus is our Great High Priest! And unless you appear in the presence of God in His name, by His mediation, you will be cursed, despoiled, humiliated, debased, and ashamed. But oh, in His name, dear people—*in* His name, united to Him by faith alone—you will find blessing, riches, honor, exaltation, and everlasting joy. Look above your failing shepherds to the Chief Shepherd. Entrust yourself to Him, and you will never be disappointed.