

Need for Just Leaders

Malachi 2:1-9; 3:5-6
SS Lesson for 03/29/2020

Devotional Scripture: Luke 11:42-44

OUTLINE

LESSON BACKGROUND AND KEY VERSE

Background from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Key Verse: Malachi 2:2

Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary

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Hear so that faith is strengthened (Rom 10:17)

Hear because it is the Word of God (1 Thess 2:13)

Hear because the more we hear, the more we are given to hear (Mark 4:22-24)

Hear because it makes me part of the family of Jesus (Luke 8:21)

Hear because it is a blessing (Luke 11:28)

Hear because it is the way to grow spiritually (1 Peter 2:2)

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Fear of God is the key to treasures (Isa 33:6)

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Obey God by living in God (1 John 3:24)

Obey God by being ready to do whatever is good (Titus 3:1)

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Mercy because it prompted God's salvation (Rom 9:16)

Mercy because it is part of His purpose (2 Tim 1:9)

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Lesson Background and Key Verse

Background from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

In the late 1940s, Billy Graham's ministry was becoming well known. Graham realized that he needed to hold himself and his ministry to an extremely high standard of conduct for the sake of the gospel message he proclaimed. In 1948, Graham and his staff created what they called the "Modesto Manifesto." They pledged themselves to follow the highest standards of conduct in every area of their lives. When the evangelist died in 2018, tributes to Graham poured in. Many of them cited his uncompromising integrity. Even those who did not accept Graham's message had to acknowledge that he was a man who practiced what he preached. During a time when many public figures were caught up in scandalous behavior, Graham remained a consistent model of faithfulness to Christ. In the days of the prophet Malachi, the leaders of God's people took the polar opposite approach. What we might call "Malachi's Manifesto" exposed the corruption of these leaders and called attention to what God has always desired.

Malachi mentions no kings at the beginning of his book. This makes establishing an approximate date for the prophet's ministry challenging. Even so, the book's contents offer some clues. The issues addressed by Malachi are similar to those facing God's people in the time of Nehemiah in the fifth century BC. With permission from King Artaxerxes of Persia, Nehemiah had traveled from Persia to Judah around 445 BC to rebuild Jerusalem's walls. Some issues addressed by both Nehemiah and Malachi include mixed marriages (Nehemiah 13:23-27; Malachi 2:11), the failure to tithe (Nehemiah 13:10-14; Malachi 3:8-10), and corrupt priests (Nehemiah 13:4-9; Malachi 1:6-2:9). These similarities point to a date for Malachi that is post-exilic. That means the setting is an era after the exile in Babylon (Chaldea) ends in 538 BC (see Ezra 1:1-4). Bolstering the conclusion that Malachi is post-exilic is the use of the title "governor" (Malachi 1:8). This was Nehemiah's official title (see Nehemiah 5:14; compare Haggai 1:1; 2:21); before the exile, Judah had kings, not governors. Based on these and other facts, scholars conclude that Malachi is chronologically the last of the prophets, of about 430 BC. The Babylonian (Chaldean) captivity occurred between the ministries of Micah and Malachi. The delinquent leadership against which Micah spoke so passionately had resurfaced in Malachi's day. And it was just as displeasing to the Lord in Malachi's time as it had been in Micah's.

Key Verse: Malachi 2:2

If 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.

Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary

2:1-2. After giving and substantiating a charge against the priests, Malachi gave them a command (**admonition**; cf. v. 4): they were to **honor** God (**My name** stands for **Me**). How they were to honor Him is clear from the ways they had failed Him (1:6-14) and from the portrayal of a true priest (2:7). Failure to honor Him would result in their experiencing **a curse** (hardships). The Mosaic Covenant had included curses for those who disobeyed the Law (see Deut. 27:15-26; 28:15-68). These curses were concerned with the people's physical, mental, and material welfare. The curse Malachi referred to would affect the priests' **blessings**, either their own blessings (as income from people's tithes and offerings) or blessings they pronounced on the people (Num. 6:22-27). Because of their hearts' condition, the curse was **already** in effect.

2:3-4. The priests were then warned of a rebuke that would fall against their seed. *Zera* ('seed') refers to grain (NIV marg.) or to physical **descendants**. The following threat of the removal of the priests from office makes the latter option more probable. Some have suggested that instead of *zera*, the text should read *zerōa* which means "arm." To rebuke one's arm was a metaphor for rendering one powerless (1 Sam. 2:31, "strength" in the NIV is lit., "arm"). This would correlate with the interpretation (cf. Mal. 2:1-2) that the curse concerned the blessings pronounced by the priests on the people. The Lord said He would **spread on**

their **faces** the waste matter **from the sacrifices**, which ironically were described as festive. “Spread,” from the verb *zārâh*, is a pun on the word *zera* (“seed”), the descendants who were the object of God’s rebuke (v. 3). The priests would be made as unclean as **the offal**. Much as it was discarded, so they would be disposed of as well. In other words they would be cast out of service. Then they would realize that **the LORD** was speaking to them. His purpose in admonishing them was to purify the priesthood **so that His covenant with Levi** could **continue**.

2:5-6. The **covenant** with Levi (v. 4), is now discussed in more detail. The tribal name Levi is used for the descendants of Levi who made up the priestly class. The covenant mentioned here refers to what may be called a covenant of grant (Num. 18:7-8, 19-21), a covenant made with an individual (and sometimes his descendants) because of some service the recipient performed. God made a similar covenant of grant with Phinehas (Num. 25:10-13). The phrase **a covenant of life and peace** seems to recall how Phinehas’ zeal for the Lord turned away God’s wrath from the people (cf. Num. 25:11 with Mal. 2:6, **He... turned many from sin**). Most important, **he revered God** (v. 5), the point of exhortation in this oracle. Besides, Levi’s teaching was **true**, and his conduct was in **uprightness**.

2:7-9. The word **instruction** is *tôrâh*, also the word for “Law.” The priests were to teach the Law (Deut. 33:10). As teachers, each priest was to be a **messenger** (*mal’ak*). However, since they were not giving true instruction, they were rebuked by the prophet whose very name, ironically, means “My messenger.” Their **teaching... caused many to stumble** because they themselves had **turned from the way**. Saying that defiled sacrifices were accepted **violated God’s covenant with Levi** (see Num. 18:19, 21). So the priests were **despised and humiliated before all the people**. This actually was a light sentence, for their penalty should have been death (Num. 18:32).

3:1a. Malachi directed the attention of the faithless and hopeless questioners (2:17) to the future. Though some have taken **My messenger** (*mal’āk*) as the writer of this book or as an angel, it seems best to see him as a future prophet. Jesus explicitly identified this person as John the Baptist (Matt. 11:7-10). The fact that this messenger will prepare His way harmonizes with Isaiah 40:3 (cf. John 1:23). The coming of this messenger was to be the first of a twofold eschatological event. The second step would be the coming of the Lord in His day.

3:1b. After the preparation by God’s messenger, **suddenly the LORD... will come to His temple**. The coming of the Lord in His day is a much-discussed theme among the prophets. Zechariah said He will come to Zion and dwell there (Zech. 8:3). Ezekiel predicted the return of the glory of God to the temple (Ezek. 43:1-5). Malachi’s two preceding oracles identified serious problems in the practice of temple worship, so the coming of the Lord to His temple would answer the questions about His justice (Mal. 2:17) and would have an ominous significance for the priests. The title **the messenger of the covenant** occurs only here in the Bible. This individual is not the same as “My messenger” in 3:1, for the messenger of the covenant comes *after* the earlier messenger. Most likely the messenger here should be identified with **the LORD** Himself. The word “messenger” can be translated “angel,” and the Angel of the Lord, a manifestation of God Himself, had been quite active in Israel’s earlier history (cf. Gen. 16:10; 22:15-18; Ex. 3:2; 33:14 with Isa. 63:9; and Judges 13:21-22). The parallel phrases, **the LORD you are seeking** and **whom you desire**, reflect the general expectation of the Lord’s coming, as predicted by many other prophets. But these phrases also carry a note of sarcasm. That Israel’s hope was superficial was indicated by her question (Mal. 2:17). However, though their hope was superficial, **He will come**.

3:2-4. The day of the Lord will be a day of judgment on the whole world, a day of disaster and death (Isa. 2:12; Joel 3:11-16; Amos 5:18-21; Zech 1:14-18). Later Malachi spoke of this day as coming like fire to burn up the wicked (Mal. 4:1). So the answer to both questions, **Who can endure the day of His coming?** and **Who can stand when He appears?** is that none of the wicked will endure. The Lord’s coming will **purify** Israel by purging out the wicked. Often the prophets spoke of the day of the Lord in connection with the judgment that would be poured on the nations and would effect Israel’s deliverance (see comments under “Major Interpretive Problems” in the *Introduction* to Joel; and cf. Zech. 14). Malachi, however, made no mention of the other nations. He concentrated on this day as a time of judgment on Israel and especially on the Levites, her leaders and teachers. The figures of **a refiner’s fire** (that burned out the dross from metal ores) and **launderer’s soap** emphasize the effectiveness of God’s spiritual purging of the nation (cf. Isa. 1:25; Jer. 6:29-30; Ezek. 22:17-22). The result would be a pure class of **Levites**. **Refined like gold and silver, they will bring offerings in righteousness... as in days gone by**. This will contrast with Israel’s unacceptable offerings of which Malachi wrote (Mal. 2:12-13). Following the return of **the LORD** and the

judgment of Israel, **offerings** will be sacrificed in the kingdom (cf. Isa. 56:7; 66:20-23; Jer. 33:18; Ezek. 40:38-43; 43:13-27; Zech. 14:16-21).

3:5. The judgment of Israel will not be limited to Levites; it will include the whole nation (cf. Ezek. 20:34-38). God **will come near** Israel **for judgment**. He will purge the nation of those who are involved in sorcery (cf. Micah 5:12), adultery, perjury, depriving workers **of their wages**, oppressing **widows** and orphans, and mistreating **aliens**—all those who **do not fear** Him. All these crimes were prohibited in the Mosaic Law. God's removing these sinners from Israel will be His answer to the nation's question about His justice (Mal. 2:17).

3:6. But will this judgment bring about the end of Israel? Will the people be consumed by the refiner's fire? No, for as other prophets had predicted, Malachi stated that Israel will be delivered in the day of **the LORD**. **The descendants of Jacob will not be destroyed**. This is because of God's covenant promise. A promise is only as good as the person who makes it. God will keep His promise to the nation of Israel—it will **not change**—because His Word, like Himself, is immutable. This is the basis for Israel's hope (cf. Deut. 4:31; Ezek. 36:22-32). Significantly the Apostle Paul gives the same reason for expecting a future for national Israel (Rom. 3:3-4; 9:6; 11:1-5, 25-29).

3:7a. Malachi's fifth oracle begins with a blanket condemnation of Israel's disobedience to God's **decrees** throughout her history. (This contrasts with the positive note of God's unchanging faithfulness which concluded the preceding oracle, v. 6.) This calls to mind God's comments about Israel's stubbornness at Sinai (Ex. 32:7-9), which Moses repeated before the nation entered Canaan (Deut. 9:6-8, 13, 23-24; 31:27-29). Certainly the history of Israel from that day to Malachi's substantiated the prophet's charge. Malachi then voiced the Lord's appeal and a promise. If Israel would **return to Him** (in faith and obedience), then He would respond and would **return to her**. This promise was based on the covenant God made with Israel (cf. Deut. 4:30-31; 30:1-10).

3:7b. Again Malachi placed Israel in the rhetorical role of questioning God's charge: **How are we to return?** Only one who is aware of the path he has taken can retrace his steps. But Israel pretended to be ignorant of her waywardness.

Major Theme Analysis

(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)

Just Leader Requirements (Mal 2:1-9)

1 "And now, O priests, this commandment is for you.

2 If 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 refuse on your faces, The refuse 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.

6 The 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.

8 But 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."

Requirement to hear God (1-4)

Hear so that belief is confirmed (Rom 10:14)

14 How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?

Hear so that faith is strengthened (Rom 10:17)

17 Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.

Hear because it is the Word of God (1 Thess 2:13)

13 And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.

Hear because the more we hear, the more we are given to hear (Mark 4:22-24)

22 For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. 23 If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear." 24 "Consider carefully what you hear," he continued. "With the measure you use, it will be measured to you — and even more.

Hear because it makes me part of the family of Jesus (Luke 8:21)

21 He replied, "My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice."

Hear because it is a blessing (Luke 11:28)

28 He replied, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it."

Hear because it is the way to grow spiritually (1 Peter 2:2)

2 Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation,

Requirement to fear God (5-7)

Fear of God leads to lacking for nothing (Ps 34:9)

9 Fear the Lord, you his saints, for those who fear him lack nothing.

Fear of God leads to having wealth and riches (Ps 112:1-3)

1 Praise the Lord. Blessed is the man who fears the Lord, who finds great delight in his commands. 2 His children will be mighty in the land; the generation of the upright will be blessed. 3 Wealth and riches are in his house, and his righteousness endures forever.

Fear of God leads to finding life, prosperity and honor (Prov 21:21)

21 He who pursues righteousness and love finds life, prosperity and honor.

Fear of God is the key to treasures (Isa 33:6)

6 He will be the sure foundation for your times, a rich store of salvation and wisdom and knowledge; the fear of the Lord is the key to this treasure.

Fear of God based on His power over death (Acts 5:9-11)

9 Peter said to her, "How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also." 10 At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. 11 Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.

Fear of God based on His wrath (Deut 9:19)

19 I feared the anger and wrath of the Lord, for he was angry enough with you to destroy you. But again the Lord listened to me.

Fear of God based on righteous judgment (Luke 23:39-41)

39 One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" 40 But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? 41 We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."

Requirement to obey God (8-9)

Obey God by being a slave to righteousness (Rom 6:15-18)

15 What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! 16 Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey — whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? 17 But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. 18 You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.

Obey God by living a life that proves obedience (2 Cor 9:13)

13 Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else.

Obey God so that we will know God (1 John 2:3)

3 We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands.

Obey God by living in God (1 John 3:24)

24 Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.

Obey God by being ready to do whatever is good (Titus 3:1)

1 Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good,

Obey God rather than man (Acts 5:29)

29 Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than men!"

Just Leader Judgments (Mal 3:5-6)

5 And I will come near you for judgment; I will be a swift witness Against sorcerers, Against adulterers, Against perjurers, Against those who exploit wage earners and widows and orphans, And against those who turn away an alien-- Because they do not fear Me," Says the Lord of hosts.

6 "For I am the Lord, I do not change; Therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob.

Judgment of wickedness (5)

Judgment of pride (Luke 20:45-47)

45 While all the people were listening, Jesus said to his disciples, 46 "Beware of the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and love to be greeted in the marketplaces and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. 47 They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely."

Judgment of not teaching sound doctrine (2 Tim 4:3-4)

3 For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. 4 They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.

Judgment of not maturing in the Word (Heb 5:12)

12 In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!

Judgment of being a false teacher (2 Peter 2:1)

1 But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them — bringing swift destruction on themselves.

Judgment of being a stumbling block (Matt 23:15)

15 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are.

Judgment of unjust angry (Matt 5:22)

22 But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

Judgment with mercy (6)

Mercy because He loves us (Rom 5:8)

8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Mercy because Jesus paid for sins (Isa 53:5-6)

5 But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. 6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Mercy because God is faithful and righteous (Rom 3:3-5)

3 What if some did not have faith? Will their lack of faith nullify God's faithfulness? 4 Not at all! Let God be true, and every man a liar. As it is written: "So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge." 5 But if our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.)

Mercy because of His grace (Eph 2:8-9)

8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— 9 not by works, so that no one can boast.

Mercy because it prompted God's salvation (Rom 9:16)

16 It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy.

Mercy because it is part of His purpose (2 Tim 1:9)

9 who has saved us and called us to a holy life — not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time,

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Commentary Thoughts from Allen Ross

I. God will remove his blessing from those who refuse to give glory to his name (2:1-4).

A. God warns people of his judgment (1, 2).

The sermon begins with the bold, direct confrontation: "The instruction is for you, O priests." One can only envision the temple filled with priests, Levites, and the people, and all of a sudden the prophet stands up to

speak and speaks directly and bluntly to the spiritual leaders. They might have anticipated that he would be critical of them, but they were not sure how critical. This would be major.

The announcement is that God would send a curse on them if they did not give glory to his name. This would be a curse on their blessings, something that God said he had already begun to do. These two words are important throughout the Bible. The word “blessing” (and the verb “to bless,” *barak*) means “enrichment”—physically, spiritually, materially. A blessing is a gift from God, but it is a gift that comes with some empowerment or enablement. What blessings had God given the priests? Well, in addition to the normal blessings for the people of God, the rain, the crops, the families, the homes, peace in their time, their health, and all that, there were the blessings of the priesthood. As priests they were empowered to lead worship, teach the Word of God, announce God’s forgiveness of sin and full atonement, eat from the offerings, dwell in the sanctuaries or the priestly cities, and have the respect of the congregation. It was a wonderful life because God had given them so much.

The opposite of the word “bless” is the word “curse”; it essentially means to ban someone, that is, to remove the person from the place of blessing, or remove the blessing. For example, when God cursed the ground in the beginning, we are told that it would no longer yield its strength in the harvest. And then when Cain was cursed, he had to flee from the fertile soil (the *‘adamah*) to be a ceaseless wanderer in the world (the *‘erets*, like the outback). Removal of a blessing is therefore a curse; the ultimate curse will be that some people will be removed from eternal blessings because of their unbelief. In Malachi 2 if God cursed the blessings of the priest, it meant that he was rendering them unfit for ministry; if he removed the blessings of priesthood from them, they would have no effective ministry even though they might remain in office. But as this section ends, God would make them contemptible and base in the opinion of the people (v. 9). And this is so true of the household of faith in all ages—because of sin the blessing of God is removed, even though the organization may continue to grind on. Jesus’ warning to the seven churches of Revelation was that he would remove their candlestick, i.e., he would remove their effectiveness as his witnesses in the world—they would cease to be a light to God. In other words, the churches would be dead, and considered worthless and irrelevant by people.

What did Malachi’s priests do to warrant this warning? They did not give glory to God’s name. Malachi presents this idea in the form of a conditional clause: “If you will not obey, if you will not take it to heart to give glory to my name.” The verb “to hear” (*shama*) has the meaning of respond to, or obey. The priests heard the Word of God read, but they were not hearing it. Jesus had to tell people that if they had ears to hear, they should listen. This is the expected faith-response. And if they will not listen, they will not make a decision (“take it to heart”). He is talking about the faith commitment to do God’s will.

And in this case, that is “to give glory to my name.” The “name” of Yahweh, of course, means his nature, his person and his works, his character, who he is. How does one give glory to a name that is already glorious. Well, the word “glory” (*kabod*) comes from the basic word “to be heavy”—what is heavy is important. To honor someone, say a father or a mother as the commandment says, means to give them their proper importance, their proper weight of authority. But how does this work with God, who has it all? The only way we can glorify the LORD is by extending the knowledge of him in the world, we add to his reputation by what we say (praise) and what we do (righteousness). To glorify God in everything we do means that we cause God to be seen in everything we do. If we sin, or fail to do what he wants us to do in worship and service, we do not glorify his name, but give people the wrong impression about God. And this is what the priests were doing.

Another example may be helpful. In Numbers 20 when the people murmured against God because there was no water, God told Moses to speak to the rock in the presence of the people so that water would come out for them. But Moses lost his temper; he said, “Listen you rebels, must we bring you water from this rock?” And he struck the rock twice and water came out. But because of that, God told Moses that he would not bring the Israelites into the promised land—that blessing would not be his, but another’s. What did Moses do wrong? He was angry and impatient, he took credit for the mission (“we”), and he disobeyed the Word of God. This was not the picture of God that he was to convey; and so God made sure he was sanctified in the eyes of the people by punishing Moses. As God said when the sons of the priests offered strange fire on the altar (Lev. 10), “I must be sanctified in them that draw near to me [=priests], and before all the people I must be glorified.” Those who represent God, represent God. That is an awesome task. But if by their words or their works they bring down God’s reputation or character, they fail to glorify his name. And God will not let anyone destroy his name.

Malachi has not yet stated what the priests were doing wrong; but whatever it is that they were doing was ruining the picture that people had of God.

B. God explains what his judgment will be (3, 4).

Now the Word of the LORD tells what this curse on the priests will be. The first statement is “I will rebuke your seed.” This is not very clear. For God to rebuke something means to change it, stop it, replace it (recall

Jesus' rebuking the winds and the waves). But the word "seed" is difficult. It could mean the literal "seed" in the fields, that is, the crops. The Book of Haggai actually discusses how God punished the nation a little earlier by bringing a blight on their crops. So that is a possibility here if the priests and the people do not obey. But since this is addressed primarily to priests, "your seed" would refer to their descendants, that is, that because of their sins their line would be stopped from being priests. This happened in the beginning of Samuel when God removed Eli and his corrupt sons from the priesthood and chose another line. This interpretation would either mean that the seed of the priests was already as bad as their fathers, or that such a curse on the father would be severely felt if he knew that by his actions he put his descendants out of ministry. Either one is possible. But this seems to be the best explanation.

Some of the ancient versions read the word as a different word here. The Hebrew word "seed" is almost the same as the word for "arm," just a vowel or two change in the same letters. They thought that the arm of the priests was rebuked. This would mean he could not offer sacrifices on the altar, he could not lift his arm to give the priestly blessing, or he was physically incapacitated in some way that he was no longer qualified to be the priest (priests, according to Leviticus 21, 22, had to be healthy and whole--no broken bones, no hunchback, no physical defects at all, because they were conveying to the people the ideal).

So Malachi 2:3a is one of those lines in the Bible that we know what it means basically--their ministry is being judged--but we do not know the precise idea in the expression that the prophet intended. And, it is not impossible that he had here a deliberate ambiguity (as the prophets often did), meaning he had a couple of things in mind and this phrase covered them.

However that line is interpreted, it leads into the rest of the verse, which is very clear--graphically clear. God said to the priests, "I will smear offal on your faces, even the offal of your feasts, and you shall be carted away with it." Zechariah used the same kind of language to describe the sins of the priests that contributed to judgment on the nation; in chapter 3 he portrayed the high priest as being clothed with filthy (=excrement bespattered) garments. These post-exilic prophets did not mince words. Now then, in the ritual the priests would have to sacrifice animals, cut out the internal unclean parts, carry them outside the camp and burn them, wash, change their clothes, and come back in. That was the normal ritual to get rid of the unclean things. But God said he would smear it across their faces--making them as unclean as the unclean parts, and so they would be carried out to the rubbish heap. Obviously this is figurative language, for God did not do this literally. But what he meant was that he was declaring them unclean, and as a result they were not allowed in the sanctuary. Their ministry was over! This would have absolutely overwhelmed Malachi's audience. He is saying they were unclean, disqualified, not welcome in the holy place, cursed by God. They thought they were doing fine. But Malachi says when God removes them from his service, then they will know that it was the LORD who did this--not just the raving of some prophet. It is a serious matter to attempt to speak for God, or minister in his name.

What was the purpose of the LORD's judging these corrupt priests? Verse 4 says he will do this so that his covenant would remain with Levi. There is no specific covenant laid out in the Bible with Levi--Levi was the son of Jacob and not a priest--and there was no covenant laid out with the tribe of Levi, the Levites. But because the LORD chose the tribe of Levi to be the priestly tribe, that choice was considered a covenant. A covenant essentially includes the LORD's calling of people, his promised blessings to them, and their obligations to the agreement; it is then sealed with a sacrifice. God called the tribe of Levi to service, gave them the wonderful blessings of ministry, but laid out their obligations in this arrangement, and then sealed it with the ordination sacrifice in Leviticus 8. That is what is meant by the covenant of Levi--it is the ministry of the priests.

II. God reminds his messengers that they must teach and live the truth (2:5-7).

A. The essence of the covenant: It is a ministry of life and peace (5).

Now the prophet reminds the priests of the calling that they received--what their ministry was supposed to be. This will make his charge against them all the more glaring by contrast. First he sets for the nature of the covenant with Levi, the nature of the ministry: it is a covenant of life and peace. The words "life and peace" in some way explain the nature of this covenant; in all probability, they state what the covenant, what the ministry, should produce. If the priests were faithfully serving in the sanctuary, speaking the truth, offering the sacrifices for atonement, praying for the people, then the worshipers would find life and peace through them. If they believed and obeyed the word, they would live; if they confessed and brought sacrifices, they would have peace with God. This is what any form of ministry is about--people need the life and the peace that God gives through the forgiveness of sin and the guidance of his Word.

But God reminds these priests that the earlier priests not only accepted the ministry and were ordained in it, they understood what an awesome task that was. God said that he gave life and peace to the early priests who were

going to minister them, and he did this that they might fear God--reverential fear that leads to adoration, obedience, and worship. If any people receive such a position as priest, minister, pastor, spiritual director, and teacher without it striking the fear of the LORD in them, then they have missed the fundamental principle of the service of the LORD. It is service because he is the LORD God. That he would choose us is amazing; that he would entrust his word to us is frightening. But if the calling is received with faith and understanding, it will make us into more devout worshipers. That is what happened with the early priests--they feared the LORD and stood in awe of his name. That kind of reverential fear in the leaders will prompt devotion and dedication in the people.

B. The means of the covenant: It is a ministry of the Word (6, 7).

The LORD continues to describe the ministry of the priesthood as he intended it to be. First he speaks of them as teachers. "The law of truth" could be interpreted either as "true instruction" (for "Law," *torah*, means "instruction," and "truth" can mean the content of the instruction was true, i.e., biblical), or "faithful instruction" (because "truth" is related to the basic idea of reliable, dependable). Probably the first is intended, given the context of this message; but that would also include the second, because if people teach the truth, then they are faithful to their calling.

Besides, the contrasting clause clarifies this: "unrighteousness was not found in his lips"--the early priests did not say things that were wrong, that did not conform to the standard of the Torah.¹ They taught the truth--and that was their primary task (see Deut. 33:10).

But second, they did not just teach the truth, they lived it. They walked with God in peace and uprightness. "To walk" is a metaphor for the activities of life, conduct. To walk "with God" means to live one's life in accordance with the will of God. That would be characterized by "peace" and "uprightness." To walk with God one has to be at peace with God; and to be at peace with God one has to be upright. So the prophet is affirming that God gave the covenant to the Levites, and they were faithful in teaching the truth and living it out before the people.

And third, to no surprise, the faithful teaching and the obedient life caused many people to turn away from iniquity. The ministry had results--people changed to follow the LORD. They put away their iniquity and followed after righteousness.

And this is still the pattern of effective spiritual leadership: teach the Word and live the life. People will hear God's Word, but they will see that it makes a difference in life, and many will respond.

And so the prophet declares the central principle that should govern the priests' service of the LORD: "The lips of the priest must keep knowledge, and people must be able to seek that Law at his mouth." Why? Because he is the messenger of the LORD (the word "messenger," Hebrew *mal'ak*, is the key theme of the book--Malachi, "my messenger").

The point is based on the blessing of Levi in Deuteronomy 33:10. There were three duties the priests were to perform: teach the Law of God, burn incense (i.e., make intercessory prayer), make sacrifices (i.e., be able to help people get to God through the provision of the atonement). But first and foremost, they were teachers. And whatever else might be said about teaching, the teacher must have knowledge, here the knowledge of God's Word. There is no place in ministry for ignorant ministers, for ministers who have not and will not study, for ministers who do not use the Word of God much in their messages. The people must feel confidence that their minister knows what God said and what it means, and that they could go with their questions and the minister could answer from Scripture. This is central to ministry, to the faith itself. If there is no solid teaching, worship become a meaningless ritual (chapter 1), and the standards of righteousness irrelevant or unknown. Whoever speaks for God must remember that he or she is God's messenger; the message is not theirs, no matter how clever they might be--it is God's message.

III. God treats with contempt those who do not comply with the standard of spiritual service (8, 9)

A. Many have corrupted the covenant (8).

Verse 8 starts with "But," a sharp contrast to the standard in verse 7. That is an ominous way to begin when the ideal has just been set forth. "But you have turned aside out of the way." They had deliberately changed the course of their service--they did not study, they did not tell people the truth, they did not live out the faith before the people. The ministry did not change--they turned away. They probably thought that they were simply making practical innovations for their age, but they were corrupting the plan of God.

And by their teaching they caused many to stumble. This no doubt refers to things like the first chapter where the priests were allowing corrupt gifts to be brought, and to the next oracle which is concerned with divorce and

marrying pagans. The last line of this sermon gives us an idea of how this worked: they were showing respect of persons over the teaching of the Law. They applied the Law differently to different people, perhaps more leniently with the rich and powerful, the same kind of favoritism that James decried in his epistle. It is evil to use the Word of God this way, to cause people to sin through the teaching, or to show favoritism through it. The other prophets spoke of the false teachers who called evil good and good evil. And we are seeing a rise in this kind of application of Scripture today. Jesus said it would have been better for that one not to have been born than to cause a little one to stumble.

B. God makes them base and low in public opinion (9).

They dishonored God in their ministry; God will now dishonor them. He will leave them alone, let them continue for a while, but now that they have been exposed, everyone will know that they are base and low. How horrible to try to be a priest in the sanctuary and know that everyone knows you are a reprobate and condemned by God. That person would rather disappear into the countryside. How horrible to try to be a minister without God's presence or power.

(Adapted from URL: <https://bible.org/seriespage/3-faithful-teaching-god-s-word-malachi-21-9>)

Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Malachi's words should serve as sobering warnings to leaders in the church. Dangers abound when we become casual about doing God's work. It's a small step from an attitude of indifference to one of anti-biblical rationalizing by those who serve the Lord in leadership positions. The late Dallas Willard once observed, "The greatest threat to devotion to Christ is service for Christ." Those who earn wages by serving the church or a parachurch ministry can come to see what they do merely as a source of income. They forget that theirs is a ministry done in service to the Lord and for His glory. Certain words and actions become part of the routine, of what is expected according to their job description. It's a slippery slope. One source of help may be for the leader to arrange to meet with a group of fellow leaders (either within or outside of the congregation) for mutual prayer and encouragement. Many have found such accountability groups greatly beneficial in keeping them spiritually sharp and providing valuable counsel when temptations or other challenges occur (compare Malachi 3:16). Speaking honestly to one another can be of immeasurable value in avoiding the spiritual barrenness that brought God's harsh criticism of the priests in Malachi's day. Inviting candid feedback from a fellow servant of Christ is always preferable to being on the receiving end of God's correction!

Concluding Thoughts from the Echoes Commentary

Defective Sacrifices - God's people in Malachi's day dishonored the Lord by bringing diseased and defective animals for sacrifice—and the priests refused to stop this practice. The leaders and the congregation refused to respond to God's love with all their heart, mind, and soul. God spoke through Malachi to warn the priests if they persisted in their sinful ways, allowed the people to stray, and continued to be a poor example—this would lead to severe problems. God's desire is always to bless His children, but corrupt activities result in negative consequences. The improper sacrifices presented before the Lord caused great misery, not prosperity.

Strong Warnings - Malachi used powerful words to warn the priests concerning their unfaithfulness. Curses would result from their disobedience. Consequences had already started because God knew the hearts of these stubborn men. If they refused to repent, He planned to destroy them by fire like dung or garbage. The Lord appointed the priests and exalted their positions. They needed to see their duties as a great privilege. But they handled God's people like common, ordinary things, instead of the Father's precious children. Instead of telling His truth, they lied and operated by their own power. These corrupt priests caused others to stumble; they defiled everything and everybody they touched.

Problems of the Day and Our Day - Malachi continued to warn the leaders of God's absolute, sudden judgment for their misconduct. Sadly, the people suffered the consequences as well. The prophet listed the ungodly activities in his day, many of which are the same today—demonic activities, ungodly marriages, and perjury. The leadership caused oppression by exploiting the less fortunate, with no concern for widows or orphans. They cheated the laborer and treated immigrants in a hostile fashion. Despite everything, the Lord reminded the Israelites of His steadfastness and His mercy. He stays faithful to His covenants.