

The Privilege and Purpose of Priesthood

Malachi 2:1 "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 truth¹ 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." (Mal 2:1-9)

At the beginning of the 18th century, had you been in Europe or America, one of the most respected professions, and indeed respected people was the clergyman, the minister, the pastor. Some of the ivy-league schools such as Harvard and Yale began primarily as divinity schools, to train ministers. In their early years, the vast majority of their graduates were headed for ministry. Fast forward to 2015, and some stats say that less than 25% of the public have any confidence in spiritual leaders. Ask parents today what future vocation they hope their children will go into, and preaching or leading the church is not high. There is a crisis of credibility around the ministry today.

Look at the headlines that newspapers love to tout "Pastor makes congregants eat grass." "Pastor Blames Devil For Stealing" In fact, even since the 19th century, look how clergy have increasingly been portrayed. Look in the novels of Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and you'll find often the clergy are arrogant, self-serving, monsters of iniquity.

It is obvious we live in a world where *church* or *minister* means to many people, *hypocrisy*. For many people, they do not hold the name of God very high, and they rightly or wrongly blame those who claim to represent him.

This passage shows us how seriously God takes the dishonouring of His name by those who represent Him in public. As you know, this is a book written to Israel after they had come back from exile. And even though they had not turned back to idolatry, a deep spiritual apathy, carelessness and downright hypocrisy had come into the spiritual leaders and the people. This section particularly carries on the indictment God had against the priests begun in chapter 1.

That has at least two implications for us. First, the closest crossover from this Old Testament situation to ours would be those who preach and teach the Word as pastors and spiritual leaders in God's church. What should they be like, and how does God view it if they are hypocrites? Christians should know what to expect in their leaders.

Second, we find out in 1 Peter that all Christians are priests. Just like Israel had official priests, God nevertheless told the whole nation in Exodus 19 that they were to be a kingdom of priests to Him – a whole nation of people that worshipped Him, and showed forth His glory and honour to the rest of the world. That's still the case with us. We are to be a worshipping people, offering up spiritual sacrifices, showing forth His praises, and demonstrating God's uniqueness, His holiness to the world. Christians should feel the weight and privilege of representing God in the world.

So as we study this passage, we need to see the great danger of hypocrisy – the perversion of priesthood. We need to see how seriously God takes dishonouring Him deliberately or even

dismissively – the punishment of the priesthood. And then we'll see God's grace, in the form of His purposes for the priesthood – we they were to be, and what we are to be.

I. The Perversion of Priesthood

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." (Mal 2:1-9)

How had these priests perverted their office? Well, the major indictment we studied already in chapter 1. The priests were dishonouring, irreverencing, disrespecting God by bringing defiled worship. Their attitudes in worship were filled with apathy and slothfulness. What a burden and a boredom God's work was, as we read in 1:13. It was a weariness to them, and they sneered at the whole thing. And flowing out of this deep disrespect in their hearts was a deep disrespect in their actions. They presented to God sacrifices that were defective, faulty. Blind, lame, diseased and even stolen animals. Animals which didn't make the grade according to God's Law, and animals that wouldn't even make the grade for a hostess gift if you visited your neighbour. They were giving leftovers to God, They had inverted the very idea of sacrifice, which means giving what costs you, giving your best to display how much you value God, and were giving what they didn't want anyway. Worship characterised by being casual, worship characterised by convenience and comfort.

The summary of this is in verse 2 of chapter 2. *2 If you will not hear, And if you will not take it to heart, To give glory to My name,"* They were not honouring, reverencing glorifying God.

How did this happen? How do you go from God-honouring priest to God-profaning priest? Verse 8 and 9 tell us. They had departed from the way. *8 But you have departed from the way; Because you have not kept My ways But have shown partiality in the law.* The priests had veered off the path they knew. They understood the requirements, but had chosen to live beneath that. They showed partiality, which means they had become man-pleasers. Instead of being God-pleasers, bound in submission to God's ways in His Word, they became man-pleasers, who cared only about who they might please, so as to pad their own living. They had become nothing more than professionals: people who conduct religious ceremonies for money. Hirelings: people who sense no truth behind their calling, who go through the motions to feed their own stomachs, and do the bare minimum, because their hearts, and their treasures are elsewhere. Yes, there may be secondary reasons why leaders fall, but the primary reason is always when people become big and God becomes small.

What is the effect on people when they see their religious leaders having no sense of awe and reverence before God? How does the average worshipper feel, when the one who should be leading him in worship seems bored, casual, dismissive of the whole thing, treating it like a child's game of make-believe? The answer is that people become confused. They doubt the reality of the whole thing. They wonder if any of it is true. They perhaps adopt the same casualness and comfort in their approach. Some of them even abandon the whole thing. Look at verse 8

You have caused many to stumble at the law.

We think immediately of the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phineas. These two priests, in the time of the judges, were so wicked that they demanded the people give them the portion of the sacrifice that belonged to God. They bullied the people. They even committed immorality with women who came to the Tabernacle.

And this is what Scripture says: *17 Therefore the sin of the young men was very great before the LORD,*

for men abhorred the offering of the LORD. (1Sa 2:17)

And we know God slew them both. Throughout the Old testament, we see God expressing his great displeasure at leaders who were false, leaders who did not feed the people, leaders who through their example led people into sin. Evil kings, corrupt judges, idolatrous priests, false prophets, anyone in spiritual leadership whose teaching and example either deceived people or discouraged people. And we come into the New Testament, and we never see an angrier Jesus Christ than when He denounced the Pharisees, whose position as spiritual leaders should have led people to God, but it was doing the opposite.

"But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in. (Mat 23:13)

Whenever someone who claims to represent God knowingly and unrepentantly misrepresents God, he becomes a source of confusion and stumbling to others. I doubt I have to do much to illustrate this to you. I wonder if there is anyone in any church who has not been touched by someone's hypocrisy. Some pastor who went beyond his Scriptural authority and intimidated or bullied. Some Sunday School teacher or deacon who wickedly used his position to take sexual advantage of young boys or girls. Some greatly respected teacher found guilty of embezzling money from the church or organisation he served. Some prominent, vocal Christian in the church looked up to by all, found to have a double-life, looking at things on a screen that he denounced when teaching. Some highly respected church leaders who is found in adultery.

And into this mess of real hypocrisy, Satan is happy to inject plenty of false accusations, plenty of fleshly conflicts, plenty of misunderstandings that are mishandled. The result is a deep mistrust, a profound suspicion, a wariness of any that occupy positions of spiritual leadership.

Some stumble at this by swearing off church for the rest of their lives. Some stumble at this by holding all spiritual leaders at arm's length, certain that at some point they'll be revealed as phonies too, and then there'll be less hurt. Some stumble at this by concluding it's all a sham, and that we should all live with a good mix of sin and righteousness, enough worldliness and holiness, because that's how the leaders live. Some stumble by deciding that the only remedy for corrupt leaders is to have no leaders at all, to have democratically controlled small groups, to have full equality, and full vocality for all.

But these are not the responses we need. If you have been hurt or discouraged or deceived by the sinfulness of man, by the hypocrisy of spiritual leaders, then this text has something to say to you. You are going to see in the next verses that God says, I hate hypocrisy in spiritual leaders ten thousand times more intensely than you do, and I will deal with it. In My time. In My way. Vengeance is Mine. Don't let false leaders take you down with them. They have perverted the way, that doesn't mean there isn't a way! They have warped God's Word, that doesn't mean His Word is not true. They have abused authority, that doesn't mean there's no such thing as godly authority. God takes this seriously, thus He warns us,

My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment. (Jam 3:1)

21 You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal? (Rom 2:21)

19 "Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. (Mat 5:19)

But then let us turn the tables for a moment from spiritual leaders to all of us as priests. To a world living in rebellion to God, every Christian represents God. We carry His name. *Christian* means

Christ-one. Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 5:20 that we are ambassadors for Christ, diplomats who represent His kingdom, and His offer of reconciliation to those still in the kingdom of darkness. We are living epistles that other men read. We are a fragrance of Christ that we bring into every space we occupy. We are lights bringing clarity. We are salt bring flavour. Just as it is possible for believers in church to stumble because of their leaders, so it is possible for unbelievers to stumble because of Christians.

This is what happens when any of us gets away from God's Word, corrupts our covenant, becomes a man-pleaser, losing sight of God's glory.

II. The Punishment of Priesthood

Malachi 2:1 "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.

It is hard to communicate the sense of outrage in God's voice. You can sense it if you understand the image here. Remember that in the work of the priests, the main thing of concern was what was holy, and what was defiled, what was clean and what was unclean. And in those sacrifices, there were parts of the animal that were unclean, and defiling, and were to actually be taken outside the tabernacle or the city, and burnt there.

God says to these hypocritical priests, I am going to take the refuse, the dung of the sacrifices you offer, and I am going to spread it on your faces. I will take the most defiling part of your work and spread it on the most public part of you. In other words, you are disgracing Me with your defiled worship, so I will defile and disgrace you. I will curse you and disgrace you and make you as contemptible as You have made Me in the sight of others. And just like the refuse is carried away and thrown out, so I will do that to you, God says to these hypocritical priests.

You can tell that God is absolutely outraged with these priests. And that explains the harshness of the language, the intensity of the threat. God hates this because of what He loves.

He loves His name, so He hates what distorts and defames His reputation. He loves people, so He hates what drives people away from Him. He hates irreverence towards His name, and He hates the hypocrisy that does that and that causes people to stumble.

But look at the interesting way God says He will do it.

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."

One of the signs that God had already done this to the priests was that they were contemptible and base before God's people. The word *priest* was said with disdain. People looked down upon them, sneered at them, because of their dishonourable ways.

Here is the principle. It is what God said to Eli, when his two sons dishonoured God and caused people to stumble: *those who honor Me I will honor, and those who despise Me shall be lightly esteemed.* (1Sa 2:30)

Ask yourself, how does the world in general think of the church? How does the world think of the

ministry, and the office of a pastor? How do movies and media picture the church, Christians, preachers? I think if we are honest, the unbeliever typically mocks and ridicules and thinks of the church with disdain.

But I want us to be aware of something. There is such a thing as the the shame of the cross. There is such a thing as the scandal of the Gospel. That is when the world despises our message, and hates the way it exposes their darkness.

But in our modern era there is more to it than that. Added to the normal scorn that the world throws on the church is the disgrace that so-called Christians have brought on themselves. This is the disgrace of a church prostituting herself before the world, its marketers, its media, its politicians. The world sees a church absolutely desperate for its acceptance. The world sees a church selling its doctrinal birthright for the sake of popularity. The world sees a church giving up transcendent, other-worldly worship, and other-worldly living for the sake of applause from the world, popularity with unbelievers, familiarity with pagans. The world sees a church which trades away more and more of its faith, until it has nothing left. It is not too strong to use the biblical imagery of whoredom, prostitution. Because when a church seeks union with God-rejecters, and gives up its virtue to do so, it is the Proverbial adulterous woman. And the same scorn reserved for those who sell their bodies for money comes to those who give up their worship and their holiness and their doctrine so as to please the world.

Those who dishonour God are dishonoured by others. It's my belief that the way the modern church has shown such irreverence to God, and made such a mockery of His name through their compromise, worldliness, have received the dishonour that God promised. Having become man-pleasers, the irony is that man despises them.

The world may never love our Gospel or its message. But they do respect a church that is deliberately different. They may not think we're cool and relevant, but they do at least respect churches that seek to live pilgrim lives, that seek to sincerely worship God, that live according to the Bible that we believe is God's Word. Them that honour God, God will honour.

But there is good news in this passage. There is grace in this passage. God not only tells us what had gone wrong, He tells us in verses 5 through 7 what was right, what priests were supposed to be – the purpose of priesthood.

III. The Purpose of Priesthood

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 truth¹ 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.

Here God remembers back to when Phineas acted so zealously for His name's sake. In the midst of spreading, rampant, flagrant, and public sin, Phineas took up a spear and publicly acted to show how highly He valued God's holiness, and how such high-handed rebellion should be treated. We call this a covenant of grant, where God made a special commitment to an individual or a group. In this case it was Phineas, the grandson of Aaron, who God promised life and peace to him and his descendants.

Phineas was a picture of what a priest should be. He was a man who did honour and reverence God. God says that he covenanted with him and his descendants so that they would honour and

revere God. *And I gave them to him that he might fear Me; So he feared Me And was reverent before My name.*

The priests were to be walking worshippers. People who worshipped God, with a feet in two worlds. They were to show God to man, they were to pray to God for man. They were to offer worship to God, and explain to man why He was worthy of it.

Priests should have been men who served with trembling joy, with gravity and gladness, with fear and gratitude. People should have seen in their offerings, in their worship, in their very demeanor that God was weighty, God was valuable, God was sacred, God was to be honoured above all other things in the world.

Woe to that Christian leader who encourages people to worship God flippantly. Woe to that leader who encourages God's people to be casual and comfortable, and tells them it is because of grace, and the New Testament, and the liberty in Christ. One day he will look into the eyes of the King, who may well say, "Why did you not give My people the living water of fearing Me?"

You and I are a race of royal priests. We are to be the walking worshippers of this age. We are to be the ones who show forth God's honour.

In this passage God gives three ways that a priest was to show honour to God.

First, a priest was to faithfully defend and teach God's Word.

6 The law of truth¹ was in his mouth, And injustice was not found on his lips. 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.

A priest that deeply revered God would deeply reverence His Word. He would make it his study. He would become so versed in the Word that people would seek it from him. But all along, he would remember that he is a messenger, not an author. He relays the message, he does not create the message. He delivers the message, he does not invent the message. He honours God by putting God's word into his own mouth and teaching it. He should not take his own words and put them in God's mouth.

To honour God in this world, we must always let God's Word be our law, and our constitution, and our guide. Ambassadors do not come up with their own policies. They relate what the king or president tells them. God-honouring Christians, God-honouring Christian leaders are marked by an absolute devotion to expound and teach and stick to God's Word.

And notice, the priests were conservatives. What does that mean? They conserved, they guarded God's Word, so as to hand it down purely.

Love God's Word. Learn it. Know it. Make it your book of books. Study it.

Second, a priest was to live a life of godliness. He was to practice what he preached.

He walked with Me in peace and equity

The priests were to walk with God in peace and equity. That is, they were to live with God in a life of communion, and flesh that out in a life of godliness and obedience. They were to be models of the God they represented. To honour God is to live out the implication of His Word, whether or not the world scorns us or laughs at us, whether or not it provides us with a material advantage or disadvantage, whether it wins us friends or creates enemies.

We're to be different. Our family lives should be different. Our dating and courting practices should be different. Our business ethics and work ethic and approach to finances should be different. What we watch and listen to and read should be different. How we speak, and resolve conflict, and forgive, and treat our neighbours and enemies should be different. Is your life salty enough for people to know that you represent a totally different culture? You represent a totally different nation. It comes not out of a burdensome keeping of rules, but out of the joyful knowledge that we have been accepted in Christ the High Priest, and so we want to please Him, and live as He did.

Are you and I salty enough for the world to taste a difference? If your family and colleagues have lumped you together with generic, bland, tasteless Christianity, then be consistent in your obedience and they will spot the difference.

Third, a priest turned people away from sin and self-destruction.
And turned many away from iniquity

Because of their reverence, their devotion to God's Word, their obedience to it, they had the authority, and the standing to call people to repentance. They could call fellow believers to a closer walk; they could call unbelievers to come to God for salvation.

Jesus said, 14 "You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. (Mat 5:14)

He did not say, a city on a hill *should* not be hidden. He said, it *cannot* be hidden. If we fear God, love His Word, live as a priestly, pilgrim people, people will know. And you should want them to know. You should let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven. (Mat 5:16)

We used to talk about godly people by saying "He is a God-fearing man." Interesting that that seems to have dropped out of our vocabulary. We say, "He is really enthusiastic" or "He's a committed Christian." It might be worth reviving that old term. It might be worth thinking of ourselves as priests who deeply fear God, and show it by our loyalty to His Word, our lives that reflect Him, and our testimony to a dying world.

We can do nothing about the public scandals in the church. We cannot deal with all the hypocrites in the world. But we can begin where we know change is possible – within. And those that honour God, God will honour.