

## **Malachi's Appeal To Backsliders (Part One)**

**Malachi 1:1 to 2:9**

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The book of Malachi is an appeal to backsliders. The spiritual climate of the people had grown cold, and Malachi rebukes them for their religious and social compromise. He directs his message to a people plagued with corrupt priests, wicked practices, and a false sense of security in their privileged relationship with God.

By way of questions and answers Malachi probes deeply into their problems of hypocrisy, infidelity, mixed marriages, divorce, false worship, and arrogance. Nevertheless, if they return to God with sincere hearts, they will be blessed. How encouraging that is, that even though they have sunk this far in sin God is still willing to forgive them.

The book of Malachi is a prophecy that reveals to us the condition of the Israelite nations today (the US, Canada, the UK, Australia, and various European nations), and the condition of mainstream Christian churches today as well. The people that Malachi warns were so sinful that God's words no longer had any impact on them.

Malachi especially relates to the mainstream Christian churches today in that the people commit the same sins that plagued ancient Israel and Judah just prior to their captivity. And sadly, many of these same sins plague the greater churches of God today because people do not resist the influence of the world, and they maintain the world's way of thinking in their lives. This prophecy is like viewing this age in a mirror.

The book of Malachi is located at a point of transition. It has been placed at the end of the Old Testament, but it anticipates the New Testament. It is evident even from a quick reading that it is post-exilic, meaning that it was composed after the Jews had been exported to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar, and returned under Zerubbabel, the new governor of Judah and Joshua, the high priest.

We can narrow the dating down even further than this with the following facts:

- 1) In Malachi's day the Temple was apparently rebuilt, which places him after Haggai and Zechariah. We find that in Malachi 1:13 and Malachi 3:1, 10.
- 2) The Jews were under a civil ruler, which places him before the death of Nehemiah, who was the last civil ruler, found in Malachi 1:8.
- 3) The offenses rebuked by Malachi are precisely the abuses Nehemiah corrected, namely, the practice of mere formal religion, mixed marriages, and the neglect of tithes. We find that in Malachi 1:6-14 and throughout Malachi.

Now since Nehemiah corrected the abuses during his second residence in Jerusalem, the period of Malachi's prophesying must be either in the period between Nehemiah's first and second residence, or during the second residence itself.

Malachi's ministry bears the same relationship to Nehemiah as Haggai and Zechariah's ministries bore to Zerubbabel and Joshua. He describes Israel as it existed at the very end of Old Testament history.

Malachi returned to Judah from Persia between the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes Longimanus, about 432 BC and 424 BC. when Artaxerxes died. Consequently, Malachi prophesied approximately one hundred years after Haggai and Zechariah, the two writers who immediately precede him in our English Bibles.

But Malachi is not only oriented to the past as the last of the Old Testament prophets, lamenting the decline of godliness in Israel. He is also oriented to the future, which is what makes him significant as a transitional figure.

Like the prophets before him, Malachi looks forward to Jesus Christ's coming and he is specific. Malachi prophesies the coming of that "messenger" who will prepare the way for God, that is John the Baptist, who will prepare the way for Jesus.

**Malachi 3:1** "Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming," says the Lord of hosts.

He ends by saying,

**Malachi 4:5-6** "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the earth with a curse."

This was the text the disciples were thinking of when they asked Jesus about Elijah in Matthew 17.

**Matthew 17:10-13** And His disciples asked Him [that is Jesus], saying, "Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" Jesus answered and said to them, "Indeed, Elijah is coming first and will restore all things. But I say to you that Elijah has come already, and they did not know him but did to him whatever they wished. Likewise the Son of Man is also about to suffer at their hands." Then the disciples understood that He spoke to them of John the Baptist.

After Malachi, the voice of prophecy ceased in Israel until John the Baptist appeared four hundred years later to announce the arrival of the Messiah, so Malachi really is the last of the old and the anticipation of the new that bridges the Old Testament and the New Testament.

Malachi is a link between the Old and New testament, but in describing the religion of Judah of Malachi's day, the book also vividly describes the declining religiosity of any era, including our own. So it is very applicable for us today.

Furthermore, perhaps more than any other Old Testament book, Malachi describes that modern attitude of mind that considers man superior to God and that has the audacity to attempt to bring God down to earth and measure Him by the yardstick of human morality.

This attitude is a recurring theme in Malachi, and it is expressed by a recurring word or term. The term is translated "Wherein" in KJV, "in what way" in the NKJV, and "how," in the ESV, NIV, and NASB, as Malachi 1:2 says "How have you loved us?"

This term appears seven times in this last of the Old Testament books. Of the numbers that carry symbolic meaning in biblical usage, seven is the most important. It is used to signify completeness or totality. Underlying all such use of the number seven lies the seven-day week, which belongs to the God-given structure of creation. God completed His own work of creation in seven days, and seven days constitute a complete cycle of time.

The symbolism of completeness occurs in a wide variety of uses of the number seven. For example, sprinkling the blood of a sacrifice seven times, shown in Leviticus 16:14, 19, indicates complete purification. The seven "eyes of the Lord, which range through the whole earth", shown in Zechariah 4:10 (ESV), indicate the completeness of God's sight of everything in His creation. The seven heads of the dragon in Revelation 12:3, and the beast in Revelation 13:1; 17:3; 17:9-11, represent the totality of satanic opposition to God and the complete sequence of rulers opposed to God's rule.

In Hebrews 1:5-14 a series of seven Old Testament quotations provide a complete demonstration of the point at issue. This is why God has inspired Malachi to write it down, as a complete demonstration of the point at issue.

This word “how” appears seven times in the ESV version of Malachi, and in every case it expresses a state of mind that challenges God’s statements, demanding that He give an accounting of Himself in human terms.

Now I am going to use the ESV translation for this analysis of the seven questions the people posed to God. As I mentioned, other versions use the terms “wherein” and “in what way,” meaning the same thing as “how.”

The first time “how” is used is in Malachi 1:2. God begins His message to the people with the words, “I have loved you.” What could He say that is more kind and merciful than that? But the people reply in critical unbelief, “How have you loved us?” Behind this question is a bitter complaint about the way the people felt they had been treated by their Creator.

**Malachi 1:2** (ESV) “I have loved you,” says the Lord. But you say, “How have you loved us?” “Is not Esau Jacob's brother?” declares the Lord. “Yet I have loved Jacob.”

As we read on in this book we discover that the religion of the people was pomp and circumstance, formal and empty, yet they were satisfied with it. They actually considered themselves to be doing quite well, even doing God a favor by the quantity of their religious activities. Does that not sound like mainstream Christianity today?

God had not prospered them in return as *they thought* they deserved. They were still a relatively weak nation and not particularly wealthy, so they ask, “How have you loved us?” The implication is that if God really did love them, He would make them rich. So right off the bat here we begin to see a parallel with Western professing Christian society today.

The second time “how” is used is in verse 6. God speaks to the religious leaders, saying, “It is you, O priests, who show contempt for my name.” But they reply, “How have we shown contempt for your name?”

**Malachi 1:6** (ESV) “A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? says the Lord of hosts to you, O priests,

who despise my name. But you say, ‘How have we despised your name?’

As we read on we find that they had been offering blind, crippled, or diseased animals in sacrifice, the animals nobody else wanted. As they did, they even complained about the weariness of serving God in this way.

**Malachi 1:12-13** (ESV) “But you profane it when you say that the Lord's table is polluted, and its fruit, that is, its food may be despised. But you say, ‘What a weariness this is,’ and you snort at it, says the Lord of hosts. You bring what has been taken by violence or is lame or sick, and this you bring as your offering! Shall I accept that from your hand? says the Lord.”

This was no proper attitude for God’s servants whatsoever, yet the priests considered themselves to be doing God a favor, while despising His service. They counter angrily under their breath, “how have we despised your name?”

The third way “how” is used is in verse 7. The attitude behind this question is the same as behind the preceding verse.

**Malachi 1:7** (ESV) “By offering polluted food upon my altar. But you say, ‘How have we polluted you?’ By saying that the Lord's table may be despised.”

The ministry considered themselves to be going beyond what was required even though they were offering deformed animals and were performing their duties with a fault-finding and bitter attitude.

The fourth way “how” is used is in Malachi 2, where Malachi says in verse 17:

**Malachi 2:17** (ESV) You have wearied the Lord with your words. But you say, “How have we wearied him?” By saying [The next lines explain the problem.], “Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them.” Or by asking, “Where is the God of justice?”

Apparently, the people had been faulting God for His management of the world's affairs. As they observed things, those who did good, meaning themselves, suffered adversity, while those who did evil, meaning everyone else, were blessed. This was unjust in their opinion. The flaw in this argument is not that God must act justly according to human standards.

Now we notice a fine contrast when we look at Abraham's example. It is interesting that Abraham expressed that view to God and was not rebuked for it. Why was that?

**Genesis 18:23-33** (NKJV) And Abraham came near and said, "Would You also destroy the righteous with the wicked? [That sounds like he is questioning God, does it not?] Suppose there were fifty righteous within the city; would You also destroy the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous that were in it? Far be it from You to do such a thing as this, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous should be as the wicked; far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" So the Lord said, "If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare all the place for their sakes." Then Abraham answered and said, "Indeed now, I who am but dust and ashes have taken it upon myself to speak to the Lord [so he is approaching God humbly]: Suppose there were five less than the fifty righteous; would You destroy all of the city for lack of five?" So He said, "If I find there forty-five, I will not destroy it." And he spoke to Him yet again and said, "Suppose there should be forty found there?" So He said, "I will not do it for the sake of forty." Then he said, "Let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak: Suppose thirty should be found there?" So He said, "I will not do it if I find thirty there." And he said, "Indeed now, I have taken it upon myself to speak to the Lord: Suppose twenty should be found there?" So He said, "I will not destroy it for the sake of twenty." [So, he is apologizing each time he asks the question, but he still poses the question.] Then he said, "Let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak but once more: Suppose ten should be found there?" And He said, "I will not destroy it for the sake of ten." So the Lord went His way as soon as He had finished speaking with Abraham; and Abraham returned to his place.

We see here a totally different attitude in Abraham's approaching God compared with the people of Judah's attitude in approaching Him. Abraham was humble and genuinely cared for the welfare of the people.

The flaw was that the people of Judah were considering themselves to be among the righteous when they were actually acting wickedly, and they wanted justice from God according to their standards. They should have been thankful that instead of God's justice they had actually been the recipients of God's grace.

The fifth question God asks is in Malachi 3 verse 7. God admonishes the people:

**Malachi 3:7** Yet from the days of your fathers you have gone away from My ordinances and have not kept them. Return to Me, and I will return to you," says the Lord of hosts. "But you said, 'in what way shall we return?'

This was the same challenge God had voiced through the first of the minor prophets, Hosea, more than three hundred years earlier in Hosea 14, where he says:

**Hosea 14:1** O Israel, return to the Lord your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity.

But the people had not returned then, and they do not return now. Instead they reply, "How are we to return?" The reply does not mean that they are ignorant of the proper stages of repentance and want to learn these steps so they can genuinely turn from sin and please God. What they mean is, "How can you say that we should return when we are already as close to you and as obedient as we can possibly be? What can we do that we have not already done?" They had a Laodicean attitude.

The sixth question God asks them is in verse 8 of Malachi 3 in which God declares:



**Malachi 3:8** “Will a man rob God? Yet you have robbed Me! But you say, ‘In what way have we robbed You?’ In tithes and offerings.”

The attitude they had here is: “Don’t throw wild charges about, God. If You think we are deficient in anything owed you, declare what You believe is owed specifically. We’ll defend ourselves, and You’ll discover that we are actually models of spiritual accountability. You will have to eat Your words.”

God replies curtly that they have robbed Him in tithes and offerings and they were not contributing with a cheerful attitude of wanting to faithfully support God’s work.

The seventh and last time we see this sequence of question and answer is in verse 13, which is similar to Malachi 1:6. Here God says:

**Malachi 3:13** “Your words have been harsh against Me,” says the Lord, “yet you say, ‘what have we spoken against You?’”

Apparently the people had been speaking against God all along, questioning His love, despising His name, defiling His sacrifices, attacking His justice, questioning His commands, and withholding His tithes. These are all very serious spiritual problems and they lead to death.

But the people and their priests had become so self-righteous that they considered their remarks and actions to be entirely justified and their alleged slander nonexistent. “What have we ever said against you?” was their astonished reaction. They had become so self-righteous that they just could not see past what they were doing.

There is a sense in which the attitude of the people depicted in Malachi is a mirror of our present secular world and mainstream Christianity because people today also want to measure God by the standards of human justice, if they do not want to do away with God entirely. We hear terms like social justice in mainstream churches, which is basically another term for Communism, so they are equating Communism with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Do you see how Satan works to twist and pervert the true gospel of Christ?

Malachi hits even closer to home than this. He not only describes the secular world of our age, but also the secular church of which people are all too often apathetic smug examples. The erroneous and presumptuous spirit of the people of Malachi's day can be compared with the identical attitude that prevails in so many alleged Christian circles today.

The people Malachi is writing to are not necessarily of the attitude that they want to throw off a yoke and say "We won't be loyal," but they are a people established in the Temple then and are in the church now. Meaning the mainstream Christian churches and sadly it has crept into the churches of God.

It is not the language of a people who say, "Let's cease to sacrifice and worship, and let's do as we please"; but it is the language of a people who say, "We are sacrificing and worshipping to please God." And yet God says, by the mouth of His servant Malachi: "You have wearied Me; you have robbed and spoken against Me."

It is speaking of people who will not tithe, or give a full tithe, or give offerings with a cheerful heart, among other things. The people were very particular and strict in outward appearances, but their hearts were far away from their ceremonies. They were conceited about their own knowledge of truth, but they responded to that knowledge mechanically.

They got unmercifully lost in the technicalities, but their hearts, their lives, their characters, and their true natures, were perpetual contradictions in the eye of God and to His will. And when Malachi tells them what God thinks of them, they look into His face and with astonishment and impertinence say, "We don't see this at all! How have we done this?" To translate it into the language of the New Testament in II Timothy 3 the apostle Paul says:

**II Timothy 3:5** having a form of godliness but denying its power.  
And from such people turn away!

That is precisely what thousands of self-righteous churchgoing people do. They do not consider themselves irreligious, on the contrary, they think of themselves as people whom God has to approve of because they are so good in and of themselves.

But whenever they have a problem in life, if a job falls through, if a romance goes sour, if sickness or death touches someone close to them, or even if they fall sick themselves, they immediately blame God, holding Him accountable.

Furthermore, people who think this way are capable of living the most corrupt lives. It is significant that II Timothy 3:5 is from a chapter describing the most deficient morality. Paul is writing of the notorious last days of this world's history. Verses 1-5 is written about perilous times and perilous men.

**II Timothy 3:1-5** But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!

As far as the greater churches of God is concerned this does not describe them. God is working with the members of His church in a very close way. But what it tells us is that many, if not all, of us have brought something in from the world and sometimes it is as bad as these things listed. So we have to be careful how we let the world influence our lives.

We read those verses and immediately translate Paul's phrases into our terminology: new narcissism, materialism, arrogance, "the new morality," hedonism, and so on. It is a dreadful picture, but what makes it even more dreadful is the context in which Paul places this depravity.

Please turn to Malachi 1, please. Each of the seven objections of the self-righteous religious people of Malachi's day is answered in turn throughout this book. But at this time, it is important to look at God's reply to them first.

**Malachi 1:1-5** [The caption in my NKJV reads: Israel Beloved of God] The burden of the word of the Lord to Israel by Malachi. “I have loved you,” says the Lord. “Yet you say, ‘In what way have You loved us?’ Was not Esau Jacob’s brother?” Says the Lord. “Yet Jacob I have loved; but Esau I have hated [or you could say have loved less], and laid waste his mountains and his heritage for the jackals of the wilderness.” Even though Edom has said, “we have been impoverished, but we will return and build the desolate places,” thus says the Lord of hosts: “they may build, but I will throw down; they shall be called the Territory of Wickedness, and the people against whom the Lord will have indignation forever. Your eyes shall see, and you shall say, ‘The Lord is magnified beyond the border of Israel.’”

Through Obadiah, God had prophesied a future destruction of Edom for its pride and the accompanying unbrotherly conduct toward the citizens of Jerusalem in the day of their calamity.

This judgment had apparently come to pass by Malachi’s time and was declared by God to be permanent. Edom had been wiped off the map, and God declares that the subjects of that nation would never be able to rebuild it.

This striking comparison between Jacob and Esau, and Judah and Edom is to remind the self-righteous, critical people of Jerusalem of the unmerited and therefore gift of God’s grace and love. They have had the audacity to demand that God show how He has loved them. They completely disregarded their unique status as His elect people. This is what God now brings to their willfully negligent attention.

By birth Esau was as much a privileged child as Jacob. Both were twin sons of the same Hebrew father and mother, Isaac and Rebekah, yet God had loved Jacob with a gracious love. All God’s dealing with Jacob and his descendants was in love.

When they were ignorant, He blessed them with a true knowledge of Himself. When they were weak and defenseless, He empowered them and shielded them from enemies. When they strayed, He disciplined them. When

they persisted in wickedness, He eventually sent the Babylonian captivity, as the prophets had warned He would do over many generations. Then He brought them back to Judah, established them within the walls of a refortified Jerusalem, and had them rebuild the Temple.

There was blessing and judgment, building and destruction. But in all these things God had loved them and was continuing to work with them in order that they might be a precious and holy people. Edom perished outright.

That is how God is working with you in His church. And if you are one of His precious people through faith in the work of Jesus Christ do not ever say or think in an accusatory way, as those in Israel said, “How have You loved us?” *Count your many blessings often and do not stop.*

Gratefully acknowledge the greatness of God’s love and determine that you will be a mirror of His grace rather than a mirror of the times in which you live. Ask yourselves, “Does my family mirror the world or does it mirror the example that Jesus Christ set and that way that God wants us to live?”

Like other prophets, Malachi realized that the heart of the trouble he was probing was a broken relationship with God. And instead of affection and trust there was hostility to God’s nature and will. That is why the priests failed to honor Him with worthy sacrifices.

Malachi was not as concerned in his writing about the minor details of a system or variety of religious worship, as he was about the refusal of reverence for a Father and obedience for a Master who was great “beyond the border of Israel.”

Malachi discusses the priests’ sins in Malachi 1:6-2:9, and he is not sparing in his criticism. Some might say he was harsh, but it was necessary.

In the first part of this section, Malachi 1:6-14, he cites the priests of his day for offering defiled sacrifices on God’s altar, harming the people, disparaging God’s service as a contemptible and intolerable burden, and defying God. And in the second part, Malachi 2:1-9, he calls for repentance and warns of a curse on the priests if they do not repent.

**Malachi 1:6** “A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am the Father, where is My honor? And if I am a Master, where is My reverence? says the Lord of hosts to you priests who despise My name. Yet you say, ‘In what way have we despised Your name?’”

Since the majority of the priests would have sons of their own, and since the law of Moses was self-evident, God should have wholehearted support for his first concern, “a son honors his father.” This appeal to the fifth commandment kept God’s covenant requirements in the foreground of their minds, that is if they even paid attention to the Ten Commandments at this time.

The servant honored his master because he belonged to him by right of purchase and had no other option but to obey. The question is whether the priests regarded God as their Father or their Master. Either way there are inescapable obligations.

A father-son relationship between God and Israel is implied at the beginning of the Exodus deliverance.

**Exodus 4:22** Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the Lord: “Israel is My son, My firstborn.”’

Isaiah’s prophecy opens with a complaint of the heavenly Father against His rebellious sons. Sadly, probably the most pronounced and regrettable sin of many professing ministers of God is that they are not fully devoted to God.

A minister must persistently and continuously push himself to the limit in giving himself up completely to the work of God. Every minister struggles with this and prays for the power and inspiration to do that, that is if they are truly of God.

If the priests of Israel, whatever their sins, had been humble and repentant there would have been hope for renewal in Israel. But the priests of Israel showed exactly the opposite attitude. Instead of humbling themselves before God, they tried to justify themselves and consequently moved even farther from Him.

God's indictment of the ministry comes at the end of this section and is in two parts. God says that the priests "have turned from the way" and "by their teaching have caused many to stumble." In other words, the problem of the nation was traceable to failure in the personal life and devotion of those whom God had called to serve Him, and in Malachi's time that was the priests.

Now the personal failures of the priests are detailed:

**Malachi 1:6-14** "A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am the Father, where is My honor? And if I am a Master, where is My reverence? says the Lord of hosts to you priests who despise My name. Yet you say, 'In what way have we despised Your name?' You offer defiled food on My altar, but say, 'in what way have we defiled You?' By saying, 'the table of the Lord is contemptible.' And when you offer the blind as a sacrifice, is it not evil? And when you offer the lame and sick, is it not evil? Offer it then to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you favorably?" says the Lord of hosts. But now entreat God's favor, that He may be gracious to us. While this is being done by your hands, will He accept you favorably?" says the Lord of hosts. Who is there even among you who would shut the doors, so that you would not kindle fire on My altar in vain? I have no pleasure in you," says the Lord of hosts, nor will I accept an offering from your hands. For from the rising of the sun, even to its going down, My name shall be great among the Gentiles; in every place incense shall be offered to My name, and a pure offering; for My name shall be great among the nations," says the Lord of hosts. But you profane it, in that you say, 'the table of the Lord is defiled; and its fruit, its food, is contemptible.' You also say, 'oh, what a weariness!' and you sneer at it," says the Lord of hosts. And you bring the stolen, the lame, and the sick; thus you bring an offering! Should I accept this from your hand?" says the Lord. "But cursed be the deceiver who has in his flock a male, and takes a vow, but sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished—for I am a great King," says the Lord of hosts, "and My name is to be feared among the nations."

There are four personal failures of the priests that we must take note of since we are a royal priesthood. We need to be very careful not be guilty of any of these offenses. First, the priests of Israel were offering defiled sacrifices on God's altar, but they were unwilling to admit this, of course.

When God said in verse 6, "It is you, O priests, who show contempt for My name," they replied, "How have we shown contempt for Your name?" And when God replied in verse 7, "You place defiled food on My altar," they answered, "How have we defiled You?" Whether they acknowledged it or not, this is what they were doing.

The text says that they were offering blind, crippled, and diseased animals on God's altar. They were offering animals no one else wanted and the Lord says, ironically, in verse 8, "Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?"

Now we do not have literal animal sacrifices today, but many professing ministers nevertheless offer God defiled sacrifices in the way they do their work. How might they offer God defiled sacrifices today?

A minister might offer a watered-down, man-pleasing message instead of the true and often disturbing message of the Word of God. He might compromise his teaching and play free and loose with the doctrines of God's truth.

He might not guard the church from false teachers and be alert to the constant threat of false doctrine coming in. He might not respect the sanctity of the Sabbath and the formality required for organized group worship of God. He might be too casual about his ministerial duties. He might grudgingly pay his tithes and reluctantly give offerings.

Now secondly, the priests of Israel were harming the people, according to this same section. Again, they would have denied it, they would have said that they were serving the people, taking their sacrifices, offering the sacrifices, perhaps even doing various sacrificial good deeds to help the needy among them. But God indicates that their despising of Him led others, even other nations, to do so also, thus harming their people.



This is what is involved in God's reference to His name being great and feared "among the nations," which is found three times in this section.

**Malachi 1:11** "For from the rising of the sun, even to its going down, My name shall be great among the Gentiles; in every place incense shall be offered to My name, and a pure offering; for My name shall be great among the nations," says the Lord of hosts.

**Malachi 1:14** "But cursed be the deceiver who has in his flock a male, and takes a vow, but sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished—for I am a great King," says the Lord of hosts, "and My name is to be feared among the nations."

If God's ministers are godly, the converted people of God will tend to be godly also. Even the ungodly, unconverted will have some reason for honoring the Lord's name. If a godly minister is setting the right example, and this goes for the members of the church setting a good example as well, it does have an impact on the rest of the world, even though we do not see it.

If ministers are unfaithful, if they suggest by their conduct that God is contemptible and his service a burden, then the people will not be edified and their lives will not exhibit the excellencies of God's character and God will be despised among the Gentiles (representing the world or unconverted), because of the unfaithfulness of the ministers.

The apostle Paul talks about this in Romans 2, where he criticizes the supposedly religious people of his day. This is the section that describes how the Jews are just as guilty as the Gentiles.

**Romans 2:17-24** Indeed you are called a Jew, and rest on the law, and make your boast in God, and know His will, and approve the things that are excellent, being instructed out of the law, and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, having the form of knowledge and truth in the law. You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal? You who say, "Do not

commit adultery,” do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law? For “the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you,” as it is written.

It is a fatal mistake to break the law of God, it is a more dreadful mistake to do so carelessly and willingly. But it is even more dreadful to cause others to dishonor God and stumble because of your transgressions.

Thirdly, Malachi suggests that the priests of Israel were to be blamed for disparaging the priest's office, which means holding the service of God in contempt. I mentioned this problem earlier, but it is stated explicitly in,

**Malachi 1:12-13** “But you profane it, in that you say, ‘the table of the Lord is defiled; and its fruit, its food, is contemptible.’ You also say, ‘Oh, what a weariness!’ and you sneer at it,” says the Lord of hosts. “And you bring the stolen, the lame, and the sick; thus you bring an offering! Should I accept this from your hand?” says the Lord.

The priests' thinking at this point contrasts that of the apostle Paul in possessing a humble spirit, but the priests of Judah felt that they were shamefully underprivileged people. They complained something like this:

“The fruit; the food; the grain; the living we get from our job, the bread, the food we receive for our service at the altar, how contemptible it is! What the people can't sell, what they refuse to eat, all the sick, the old and defective animals are palmed off on us, the priests, and the best parts, the fat, must be offered on the altar, while we get what is left! And what a weariness to stand all day long and be ready whenever someone feels like bringing his sacrifice, to slay it, and skin it, and gut it, and cut it up; it's a filthy, bloody job, and what do we get out of it? A few pieces of tough meat, unfit for food!”

Dissatisfied, they fault the Lord for conditions they themselves have brought about by not teaching God's way of life. This kind of attitude does not love the church. They do not seem to love His Word, His people, or His work. What a vivid example of the very attitude reproved by Malachi!

The fourth and final point of Malachi's criticism of the ministry is their brazen defying of God. It is the attitude we have already seen in this overview of Malachi, the characteristic attitude of the time. When God says in Malachi 1:6, "It is you, O priests, who show contempt for My name," the priests reply, "How have we shown contempt for your name?" When God replies in verse 7, "You place defiled food on My altar," they answer, "How have we defiled You?"

The priests considered themselves to be righteous at this point, but their answers are not the answers of righteous men. They are the answers of the self-righteous. The righteous do not defend themselves arrogantly when God criticizes them.

Job illustrates the attitude of the righteous in the opening chapter of Job. Job is called a righteous man, but he suffers the loss of his wealth, family, and his health in spite of his righteousness. The bulk of the book is an account of his attempt to understand these devastating reversals in the face of the simplistic and harsh explanations of his friends.

You might say that his friends were acting on the mentality of the prosperity gospel. At last God speaks, calling Job to account. God reminds him of his ignorance, taking several chapters to stress His own might and wisdom as contrasted with Job's weakness and ignorance.

When it is over, Job does not answer with a self-righteous attitude as the priests in Judah did, instead, he says,

**Job 42:5-6** "I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. Therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes."

That is what we must do, and will do, when we truly meet with God in prayer and worship. And this is something we should be contemplating on as we approach the Passover season.

There is one more interesting point in this section. It is the suggestion in verse 10 that it would be better, in God's sight, for the Jerusalem temple to be closed than for such contemptible service to continue.

**Malachi 1:10** “Who is there even among you who would shut the doors, so that you would not kindle fire on My altar in vain? I have no pleasure in you,” says the Lord of hosts, “nor will I accept an offering from your hands.”

God’s desire that someone might close the doors of the Temple veils a threat that God would Himself bring the Temple worship to an end, which He did forever by the agency of the Roman armies under Titus in AD 70.

Should not the same judgment rightly apply today? Professing Christians are very concerned with church growth, but the cause of Christ and God the Father would be better advanced in some instances by closing some churches than by opening them. By the existence of unbelieving churches, the gospel of Christ is diluted and even contradicted in this world.

At this point Malachi drops his rehearsal of the sins of God’s priests and instead calls them to a genuine and thorough repentance. So God has been indicting these priests through Malachi and now He is going to have mercy on them and encourage them.

Malachi calls them to listen to what the Lord is saying and to set their hearts on honoring God. If they do not, God promises to send a curse on them and their descendants.

**Malachi 2:1-4** “And now, O priests, this commandment is for you. 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. Behold, I will rebuke your descendants and spread refuse on your faces [Boy, if it is not bad enough to be rebuked, it gets really nasty at that point!], the refuse of your solemn feasts; and one will take you away with it. Then you shall know that I have sent this commandment to you, that My covenant with Levi may continue,” says the Lord of hosts.

So in verse 4 is when He gives them the ultimatum and encouragement to turn back around to the covenant with Levi. Now what is significant in this

section is the brief but excellent portrait of a true minister interjected into the middle of God's rebuke of the unbelieving ministry.

In verse 4 God looks back to Levi, the father of the tribe of priests, and notes how Levi revered God and honored His profession.

**Malachi 2:5-7** "My covenant was with him [Levi], 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. 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. 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."

The covenant mentioned here refers to what may be called a covenant of grant, a covenant made with an individual, and sometimes with his descendants, because of some service the recipient performed.

God made a similar covenant of grant with Phinehas in Numbers 25.

**Numbers 25:10-13** Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: "Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, has turned back My wrath from the children of Israel, because he was zealous with My zeal among them, so that I did not consume the children of Israel in My zeal. Therefore say, 'Behold, I give to him My covenant of peace; and it shall be to him and his descendants after him a covenant of an everlasting priesthood, because he was zealous for his God, and made atonement for the children of Israel.'"

Most important, Levi revered God, which is the point of the appeal in Malachi 2. Besides, Levi's teaching was true and his conduct was upright.

Malachi 2:5-7 tells how a minister, or anyone else who is called to speak in God's name, should live and testify. Like the longer section dealing with the priest's faults, it also has four divisions. The first indication of a true minister is a proper relationship to God, which Malachi calls reverence. Verse 5 says:

**Malachi 2:5** “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.”

Most people are aware that the word “fear,” often used in translations of Old Testament texts, actually means “reverence.” So when the psalmist writes in Psalm 111:10, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,” he is actually saying that true knowledge begins with a reverential awe of God.

For example, Moses made this distinction clear to the people of Israel after their reaction to God's self-revelation in the thunder, lightning, and trumpet blast on Mt. Sinai at the giving of the Ten Commandments. The Israelites were so fearful that they pleaded with Moses to be the one to talk to them rather than God.

**Exodus 20:19-20** Then they said to Moses, “You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die.” And Moses said to the people, “Do not fear; for God has come to test you, and that His fear may be before you, so that you may not sin.”

So the fear of the Lord is not merely shaking in one's boots but is better understood as that deep mixture of awe, fear, and honor due the Almighty King and Creator of everything. All things spiritual begin with such reverence, and God's ministers need to cultivate it more than anything else.

The second distinction that Malachi makes of the man God holds out as an example to the false priests of Israel is, personal commitment to the truth of God's Word. Verse 6 says:

**Malachi 2:6** “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.”

To speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, is a huge obligation were it not for the written Word of God, which is the minister's duty to proclaim.

Left to ourselves we could speak little truth, mixed with error. But when we proclaim God's Word, we proclaim what is eternally truthful. Not only true for a particular moment of history or a particular person, but true for all time and for all people. To proclaim that Word is a great responsibility.

The third thing that Malachi mentions is that the true minister of God must be a man of integrity characterized by godlike character and devotion, even though he still makes mistakes being human.

Verse 6 again says:

**Malachi 2:6** "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."

The essential requirement here is faithfulness and godliness. The minister must be faithful to the teachings of Scripture and be godly. Godliness requires knowledge, reverence, affection, faithfulness, submission, gratitude, and obedience.

As it is related to character and conduct it is determined by the principle of deeply ingrained love and reverence of God. Godliness means more than claiming to be a Christian and having good conduct, it also means the genuineness and power of a vital union with God, which the Holy Spirit enables us with.

Reverence for God is referred to in Hebrews 5 as "godly fear."

**Hebrews 5:7** . . . who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear [or reverence].

In Hebrews 12, reverence and godly fear are used virtually interchangeably.

**Hebrews 12:28** Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God

acceptably with reverence and godly fear. [There are two different terms used here, one for reverence and one for godly fear.]

The fourth thing Malachi quotes God as saying is that a priest, or minister, should guard the truth and be ready to give an answer for the hope that is in him. Verse 7 says:

**Malachi 2:7** “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.”

Clearly, Malachi is not talking here about the mere conveyance of information, as if the minister were to be merely a storehouse of details about the history of the kings of Israel and Judah, or the background of the New Testament. Malachi is talking about the knowledge of God, which leads to salvation.

**John 17:3** “And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.”

Malachi is talking about the way to live a God-pleasing life. The godly minister passes this on, and the sheep look to him for the instruction and are fed. The priests were to teach the law and the Levites were commanded to do this in Deuteronomy 33.

**Deuteronomy 33:10** “They shall teach Jacob Your judgments, and Israel Your law. They shall put incense before You, and a whole burnt sacrifice on Your altar.”

As teachers, each priest was to be a messenger. However, since they were not giving true instruction, they were rebuked by the prophet Malachi whose very name, ironically, means “My messenger.”

Next, we see God’s just retribution for the fact that the priests departed from His ways and had a greater respect for men. When it came to judgments in



the administration of the law, they act with partiality. They mediated according to who they liked more, rather than by righteous principles found in the law.

**Malachi 2:8-9** “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. “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.”

Their teaching caused many to stumble because they themselves had turned from the way and used the law to their benefit. Saying that defiled sacrifices were acceptable violating God's covenant with Levi.

**Numbers 18:19** “All the heave offerings of the holy things, which the children of Israel offer to the Lord, I have given to you and your sons and daughters with you as an ordinance forever; it is a covenant of salt forever before the Lord with you and your descendants with you.”

**Numbers 18:21** “Behold, I have given the children of Levi all the tithes in Israel as an inheritance in return for the work which they perform, the work of the tabernacle of meeting.”

So the priests were despised and humiliated before all the people and this actually was a light sentence, because their penalty should have been death. Jumping down to verse 32.

**Numbers 18:32** “And you shall bear no sin because of it, when you have lifted up the best of it. But you shall not profane the holy gifts of the children of Israel, lest you die.”

So God was being very merciful to the priests in Judah in Malachi's time. Now the Levite priests departed out of the way of knowledge, truth, equity, and reverence of God which God appointed to Aaron and the Levites. In verse 8 of Malachi the Lord says:

**Malachi 2:8** “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.

He does not simply say, “in the law,” but rather “at” it. The law was what they stumbled at. The people not only misunderstood the law through the false teaching of the priests, but the priests said that it allowed things which were actually sin. So, the law itself became their source of stumbling.

As Jesus Himself was “a rock of offense” on which the Jews stumbled, because through His divine holiness He was not what they expected Him to be. So in contrast, the law became an offense to them through the unholiness and inconsistency of the lives and ways of those who taught it, the priests. They confused the people and taught them poorly.

In a similar way, we now hear Christianity spoken against, partly because of the inconsistency of Christians. This is why Paul said what he said to the Jews in Romans 2.

**Romans 2:24** For “the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you,” as it is written.

Paul is quoting is from Isaiah 52 here.

**Isaiah 52:5** “Now therefore, what have I here,” says the Lord, “that My people are taken away for nothing? Those who rule over them make them wail,” says the Lord, “and My name is blasphemed continually every day.”

Does that not sound exactly like what is going on in the world today? “My name is blasphemed continually every day!” Now what I find interesting and terrifying at the same time is that in all these cases have happened to Israel in the past, they have gone into captivity or worse because of it.

God wants more than a mere *profession* of Christianity. He desires a true witness in the lives of those who name His name. It is not enough to merely listen to God's truth, but the truth must be embraced and followed to its logical and beneficial consequences in life.

In a world where comparatively few people have any convictions at all, and where many who have convictions refuse to stand up and be counted, God points out the dire results.

The masses come to ridicule the power of faith in life, and come, insensibly, to blaspheme God because He cannot be seen where He wants to display Himself, in the hearts and lives of those who have His Spirit abiding within and who have life and peace.

**Malachi 2:5** "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."

That covenant was with Levi and in a sense we have a similar covenant as well. So, why is what Malachi says applicable and important for us today? Because we are in training as a royal priesthood to do the responsibilities of priests given to us by our great and glorious High Priest, the true Melchizedek, Jesus Christ, with whom the covenant of life and peace is made.

Malachi is charging the religious leaders and the people with being backsliders, and he is warning us not to do the same. Many of us have been trying to live God's way of life in conflict with Satan's society for many years. It has been a long spiritual war of many battles. It is easy to become war-weary and weariness is a human tendency we are encouraged to resist.

**Galatians 6:9-10** And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.

So God reveals through Malachi what pitfalls to avoid as we strive to carry out our priestly duties in our personal lives, in our families, and in the church. Here is what God expects to say to us when He returns.

**Revelation 2:3** . . . and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary.