

3. Portrait of a Faithful Leader

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[0 : 00] Well, let's turn in our Bibles to Malachi, chapter 2, on page 801 in our pew Bibles.

Now, it is just possible that when you heard me read this passage a few minutes ago, some of you may have said to yourselves, we really are in an Old Testament backwater with this passage, aren't we?

In fact, if we were asked to choose a passage in the Old Testament that seems more remote from the New Testament Gospel, this might be it. I mean, Old Testament priests, dung being spread on people's faces, the covenant of Levi being corrupted, whatever that is.

What has this to do with the cross and the resurrection and the forgiveness of sins, we might think? Well, that's a fair question. Those are fair questions to ask. But I hope I'll be able to persuade you that this passage has a great deal to say to New Testament Christians, a great deal that crosses the divide between the Old Covenant and the New, if indeed there is a divide between the two.

Of course, there are certain details here in this passage, as there were in our passage last week, which are specific to the life of Jerusalem in 450 BC, or thereabouts, when Malachi was preaching these words to his contemporaries.

[1 : 34] But as well as those specific details, there are abiding principles here to do with leadership, which we need to listen to carefully if our churches are to be godly and God-pleasing fellowships.

Now, in this part of the book of Malachi, the prophet is speaking to the priests, because they are the spiritual leaders of the people of Israel, or they should have been the spiritual leaders, but they were failing in their responsibilities.

They were failing in two main ways. First, they were not following the right practices in the way that they offered sacrifices. And secondly, they were not instructing the people properly, which meant that they were failing right across the board, because offering the sacrifices and instructing God's people in the law of Moses, those were the two main functions of the priests.

So they were dismally at fault in both directions. We saw last week, from chapter 1, verses 6 to 14, that they were colluding with the people, and offering sick and lame animals as sacrifices to the Lord, whereas the law of Moses made it quite clear that they ought to bring unblemished and healthy animals for sacrifice.

The sacrificial offering should be a sacrifice costly to the worshipper. But the people, so as to cut financial corners, were bringing the sickly runts of their flocks to the priests for sacrifice.

[2 : 59] And the priests were accepting them. They were turning a blind eye to all this, because they'd grown sluggish, and they'd lost sight of the importance of the law of Moses. And now here, in chapter 2, verses 1 to 9, the priests are being equally sluggish, and they're so unconcerned for the glory and honour of God that they're not willing to teach the scriptures, the books of Moses.

So something has gone profoundly wrong in the hearts of these priests. Yes, they're still going reluctantly through the motions of their responsibilities, still offering the sacrifices, although the wrong type, still delivering some kind of instruction, as chapter 2, verse 8 makes plain, although the word instruction there might almost be an inverted commas.

But there's a profound corruption in these men. The rot has somehow crept into their bones. They're not men who want to love the Lord, or to please him. They're not men who want to live vigorously and strenuously for his honour.

And so through his servant Malachi, the Lord confronts these reprehensible priests, and he tells them plainly what he thinks about them. And it's not pretty reading. Now, what sort of bearing is all this going to have on people like us?

Well, it's going to teach us about the standards expected of those who lead God's people. Now, certainly it's true that the church today does not need priests.

[4 : 28] And the reason for that is that when Christ came, he came as the final priest. He is the great high priest. And all that is unfolded for us, especially in the letter to the Hebrews.

His priesthood, like that of Melchizedek, goes on forever. He's the only priest, therefore, that the church needs today. The sacrifice that he offered was a sacrifice once for all as our priest.

And the blood of the covenant that he presented is effective forever. So his sacrifice never has to be repeated. So when we hear people speak of priests in various branches of the church, in the Roman Catholic Church or the Eastern Orthodox Church, or even, I regret to say, the Anglican churches or some of them, we know that something has become skewed.

Something important has been misunderstood. It has not been understood that the priesthood of Christ fulfills, supersedes and brings to an end the role of the Old Testament Jewish priests.

So we don't have priests in the churches today because we don't need to carry on offering blood sacrifices to God for the forgiveness of our sins. The sacrificial and priestly element in the leadership of God's people is no longer necessary.

[5 : 44] But the other function of the Old Testament priests as the teachers of God's law and words, that is something which the churches will always need right until the Lord returns.

The New Testament, you'll know, is full of the need of teachers of the Gospel and of the Scriptures. Think of the Lord Jesus. He commissioned first 12 and then 72 others to go out and preach the Gospel.

The Acts of the Apostles is full of people travelling around the Mediterranean world, teaching and preaching the Gospel. Or think of the Apostle Paul, writing his letters to Timothy and Titus.

He draws a very clear profile of the Christian leader who is, well, his core function is to be a teacher of the Scriptures, a teacher of the Christian faith, able to instruct the Church and able to refute and counter the arguments of those who oppose the Gospel.

So what Malachi the prophet has to say about the priest as a teacher of God's words and law is directly applicable to those in our churches who lead and teach.

[6 : 49] And Malachi is not only speaking here about the intellectual qualities of the leader, he's speaking also about the character, the values, the moral qualities of the leader.

So it's pretty searching stuff. So if you're a leader or a teacher in the Church, in whatever sphere, if you don't want to be examined by Malachi's searchlight, I guess the moment to leave this building is now.

Well, I realise, of course, that the majority of Christian people are not leaders and teachers and never will be elders or ministers or study group leaders or young people's teachers.

So does this passage have anything to say to them, the majority? It certainly does. You need to understand what sort of people Christian leaders ought to be because you are on the receiving end of their leadership and teaching week after week.

You don't want to be led up the garden path by a quack preacher or a pastoral elder who turns out to be an old rogue, do you? And you know, you know this, we all know this, that the quality of a church's life is largely determined by the quality of its leadership.

[8 : 02] Even the strongest and finest of churches can dwindle and die in a very short time if good leadership is followed by bad. So this is a passage to make us tremble.

It certainly makes me tremble. And if you're a leader or a Bible teacher, I'm sure it will make you extremely thoughtful. It's very challenging because the profit standards are so high.

But in the end, I hope we'll find it very encouraging as well because fine Christian leadership is such a blessing to those churches that have it. Now in a few minutes, I want to draw from this passage what you might call Malachi's portrait of the faithful and true leader.

The prophet gives us a lovely portrait of the true instructor here, set in the midst of his castigations of the corrupt instructor. But I need to talk first about Malachi's castigations and condemnations.

Ultimately, of course, it is the Lord himself and not Malachi who is calling the corrupt leader to account. This whole passage from verse 1 to verse 9 you'll see is set in inverted commas in the English Standard Version and it's written in the first person singular.

[9 : 17] It's the Lord speaking and he's the only speaker. And in verse 1, he makes it clear that what he has to say is for the priests, the leaders of God's people who have to bear the great responsibility in the end.

Now the heart of the Lord's quarrel with them, as verse 2 shows, is that they are not interested in giving honour to his name. Let me read verse 2 again. If you will not listen, you priests, if you will not take it to heart to give honour to my name, says the Lord of hosts, then I will send the curse upon you and I will curse your blessings.

Indeed, I've already cursed them because you do not lay it. That, I think, is the honour of his name to heart. So they don't fear him, these men. They don't revere him or stand in awe of him.

In other words, he means very little to them. So they may pay him lip service, but he doesn't fill their vision. In practical terms, they have become like atheists.

Now if you pressed them, of course they would say they believe in the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, but they don't live as if they do. They're not concerned to teach the truth about him. So the Lord has to say to them in verse 8, you have turned aside from the way.

[10 : 31] You have caused many to stumble by your instruction. And then the Lord says something which shows just how he views their behaviour. He says, you see, at the end of verse 8, you have corrupted the covenant of Levi.

And that element too is at the heart of God's quarrel with them. In failing to honour him, they are corrupting the covenant, trampling on it, treating it as if it were a worthless piece of paper.

Whereas in fact, the covenant is the gracious basis of God's whole relationship with his people. It's the agreement made by God with Israel, whereby he takes Israel to be his people, his beloved, and he pledges himself to be their God.

Now you may be a little surprised to see in verse 8, this phrase, the covenant of Levi, or in verse 4, my covenant with Levi. You may scratch your head as you think through your Old Testament and you might say to yourself, did God ever make a covenant with Levi?

I know he made a covenant with Noah, and with Abraham, and with David, and with all of Israel through Moses, but what about Levi? I can't remember a covenant with him. Well, this phrase, the covenant of or with Levi, simply refers to that part of the Mosaic covenant or the law of Moses which sets up the Old Testament priesthood.

[11 : 56] Moses and Aaron, you remember, were brothers and they came from the tribe of Levi and the priesthood was to be drawn exclusively from the descendants of Aaron. So this phrase, the covenant with Levi, simply means that part of the law of Moses that describes the work and function of the Old Testament priests.

Levi, not the original Levi who was one of Jacob's sons, but Levi, as the Lord describes him here in verses 5 and 6, is the blueprint priest, the ideal priest, the priest as he ought to be, a man of integrity and of true instruction.

But the Lord's quarrel with Malachi's contemporaries who were priests is that they had dramatically failed to live up to this ideal. They surely knew how the law of Moses described the work of the priests and the character of the priests, but they chose to ignore Moses.

It's a route, of course, that many have followed. The Bible says so and so, but I'll ignore it. And the consequence was that these priests have departed radically from the covenant.

Now, what happens when the leaders of God's people depart from the terms of God's covenant? covenant? The answer is here that they find themselves cursed by him.

[13 : 15] So the Lord says in verse 2, I will send the curse upon you and I will curse your blessings. Indeed, I have already cursed them. Now, the covenant that was made with the people of Israel through Moses is set up on a very simple basis.

And when you read through your books of Exodus and Leviticus and Numbers and Deuteronomy, it can seem all rather complicated. But it's really very simple. God is saying to the people, this is the way you are to live as the people whom I have rescued from slavery.

These are the laws, including the laws about the priesthood, which I give to you so that you can live a holy life. And if you obey my laws, if you keep the terms of my covenant, I will bless you.

Indeed, I will lavish so much blessing upon you that you won't be able to contain it. But if you disobey my laws, if you treat them with contempt, my curses will rest upon you.

So it's very simple. With the law of Moses, to obey brings God's blessing, but to disobey brings God's curse. Now, of course, the same thing is true of the Gospel when you come to think of it.

[14 : 24] If we obey the Gospel, and that's very much a New Testament phrase, not simply to believe the Gospel, but to obey it. If we obey the Gospel and submit to Christ in repentance and faith, we are blessed lavishly here and in eternity.

But if we disobey the Gospel, if we refuse Christ's Lordship and his salvation, then we remain under God's anger and curse both now and in eternity.

The gracious and loving God of both the Old and the New Testaments promises unimaginable blessings to those who submit to him, and yet he must turn away and reject those who turn away from him.

Now this is the sad truth about these priests in Malachi chapter 2. Because they refuse to honour God's name, God will curse them. Indeed, his curse, he says here, is already upon them.

And what will be the further outcome of this? Well, look on to verse 3. Behold, he says, I will rebuke your offspring and spread dung on your faces, the dung of your offerings, and you shall be taken away with it.

[15 : 32] In other words, God's curse will run on into the next generation who will be rebuked, which I think means rejected. And this rejection by God is vividly pictured.

The dung of the sacrificial offerings refers, well, obviously to the feces within the entrails of the sacrificial animal. You think of the animals being brought into the temple and slaughtered.

They're slaughtered and then cut up and that involves disemboweling them. Gralacht, I think they say up in the highlands, don't they? Taking out the insides. And there's a lot of insides to a beast when it's been slaughtered.

I have a friend, in fact, he supplies me with chicken food and he lives a mile or two from where I live in Ayrshire. I went up to his barn the other day and he'd just slaughtered a bullock. It was a huge beast. It looked like a buffalo hanging up from the top of the barn.

It had been sliced right down the middle by one of these special cutters and he'd disemboweled the beast and there was a big wheelbarrow full of the entrails. I didn't know there could be so much entrails inside a bullock but there was.

[16 : 34] Terrific amount. Now, there's a lot of dung in the bowels of a slaughtered animal. I'm sorry to be rather earthy but we have to understand what it all means. And in the Old Testament law, dung is not merely unpleasant stuff.

I mean, that's the way we think of it. It's unpleasant. It needs to be flushed down the drain, doesn't it? But in the Old Testament, it's not merely that. It is ceremonially defiling. That's the point of it. It makes a person unacceptable in the sight of God.

So this nasty picture in verse 3 is making the point that God is rejecting these priests. Because they refuse to honour him, he's confirming their defilement and rejection by spreading dung on their faces and as the end of verse 3 puts it, by causing them to be carried out with the defiling dung away from God's sight and presence.

So these men who should have been God's delight and his pride and joy end up on the dunghill with the manure. It's a gruesome picture of the way that God must reject those who reject him.

It's a gruesome picture too of the way God rejects those leaders of his people who reject his word. And he goes on in verse 4, So shall you know that I have sent this command to you that my covenant with Levi may stand, says the Lord of hosts.

[18 : 02] In other words, my covenant with Levi must stand. I'm not going to allow it to be defiled and treated with contempt like this. I think it's rather like, think of a school.

If the head teacher at a school sees a particular school rule being broken, he must uphold that rule by punishing the offender. If he doesn't punish the offender, the rule no longer stands.

It's made ineffective. And in the same way, if God's covenant with Levi is to stand firm for the future, the offenders who break it and despise it must be punished.

And look on to halfway through verse 8. You have corrupted the covenant of Levi, says the Lord of hosts. And so I make you despised and abased before all the people inasmuch as you do not keep my ways but show partiality in your instruction.

So these corrupt priests will not only be taken out to the dunghill beyond the reach of grace and mercy, they will also be humiliated before the Lord's people, abased before the people.

[19 : 10] The Lord's people will know in the end that these are men who have abdicated their responsibilities and they will be publicly humiliated. disgrace before God and men is the final end of leaders who refuse to honour the Lord.

Well, I wonder if there's anybody here who still wants to be a leader or teacher of the people of God. However, however, the word of God is a wonderful thing because in the midst of this picture of denunciation and judgment there emerges a wonderful portrait of the true Levi, the faithful and true teacher who is determined to uphold the Lord's honour.

So let's look at this portrait now and notice the features of the faithful leader. For those of us who are already leaders and teachers of the people of God, here is not only our job description but the description of what to aspire to, our highest longings and values.

And for those here who may not be leaders and teachers now but I imagine there are quite a few of you who will be one day. Here is a picture of the kind of person that God looks for. The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.

So here's a picture of the Lord's faithful worker. I think I've got six brief points. If somebody sitting next to you has fallen asleep do insert the elbow just now but I'll make them very brief points.

[20 : 38] So first, the true leader has the honour of the Lord in his heart. Look back to verse 2. If you will not listen, if you will not take it to heart to give honour to my name says the Lord of hosts then I will send the curse upon you.

Now notice the wording carefully. The true leader is to take it to heart to give honour to the name of the Lord. The honour of the Lord is something so valuable that it is worn on the very heart.

The true leader's heart is jealous for the honour of the Lord. Now, how do we know if a leader in God's church has taken it to heart to honour God's name?

We know it by the way he acts when the honour of God's name is being blackened or called into question. For example, think of a dinner party where there might be half a dozen or a dozen guests.

If the leader of God's people is at a dinner party and somebody pours scorn on the Lord or the Bible, does he simply sit back like a mouse and say nothing? Or does he sit forward and then graciously but firmly challenge the one who is daring to defy the Lord of hosts?

[21 : 54] Is he prepared to defend the honour of his master? Or does he say nothing for fear that he will lose people's good opinion? Is he prepared to stand up for the Lord even if everybody should think him a fool?

A true leader will value the Lord's honour more than his own reputation. He values the Lord more than the good opinion of a thousand people.

Then second, the true leader of God's people values the covenant. One of the defining marks of these false priests is that they despised the covenant.

Now they knew about it. They'd read the books of Moses. Of course they had. But in effect, they had dropped the books of Moses into the waste paper basket and they had dropped a lighted match in after them.

They had turned their backs on the covenant. But look how God speaks of the covenant in verse 5. My covenant with Levi, he says, was one of life and peace and I gave them to him.

[22 : 54] It was a covenant of fear and he feared me. He stood in awe of my name. So here is the true leader, the true Levi. Because he fears the Lord and stands in awe of the Lord's name, he enjoys life and peace.

Life and peace will always come to those who rest in God's covenant, who love the covenant and obey it. And the true leader of God's people not only values God's covenant, he preaches it and teaches it and he invites people to join the great crowd of those who belong to it and are blessed with life and peace.

Now in just the same way, the new covenant is a covenant of life and peace because to come to Christ and to belong to him, well that is life and peace, isn't it? To enjoy his realm forever.

It's the ending of hostilities between man and God. I wonder if there might be any person here this evening who is not yet a party to God's covenant.

If you haven't yet come to the Lord Jesus, you are not yet bound into God's covenant of life and peace. You are still out there in the realm of death and hostility to God.

[24 : 06] God's answer, and it's the only answer to the plight and misery of mankind, is to provide a covenant, a solemn binding agreement whereby life and peace are freely offered and all paid for and guaranteed by the blood of Jesus shed upon the cross.

The covenant is the sure basis of the relationship in which God binds himself to his people and guarantees to bring them through death to everlasting life.

So the true leader of God's people is delighted with God's covenant of life and peace and he urges other people to avail themselves also of it. Then third, the true leader of God's people teaches the truth and guards knowledge.

Do you see it there in verse 6? True instruction was in his mouth and no wrong was found on his lips. And then verse 7, for the lips of a priest should guard knowledge.

Now friends, here's a thing. Why do you think it's easier to teach the truths of elementary mathematics or elementary English grammar than it is to teach the truths of the Bible?

[25 : 24] The answer surely is that the truths of elementary maths or English cannot be denied. So for example, if a teacher at school says to her class, the square root of 16 is 4, her statement cannot be denied.

I'm right about that, aren't I? The square root of 16 is 4. Okay, her statement cannot be denied. It is obviously true. I'm no mathematician, but those who know anything about maths know that that is true.

Or think of English grammar. If the teacher stands before the class and she says the words hungry and naughty are adjectives and often apply to little boys, again, she can't be denied, can she?

It's true. But if a Christian leader says in a public setting Jesus is Lord and is the only way to God the Father, a hundred voices will be raised against him questioning him and undermining his assertion.

And that is why to teach the truth about God is difficult. The Christian leader needs not only the intellectual ability to grasp the message of the Bible, but also a certain measure of moral courage if he is to assert the Bible's teaching in the face of contrary opinions.

[26 : 42] Now that is also why in the words of verse 7, his lips must guard knowledge. The truth needs to be guarded and protected. If the true knowledge of God as taught in the Bible is not guarded by Christian leaders, it will quickly be distorted into all sorts of shapes.

The gospel is so much at loggerheads with man-made religions. Man-made religions, all the non-Christian religions, fundamentally teach that man must win his own salvation by his own effort.

He's got to work his own passage to heaven. Only Christianity teaches the grace of God that a merciful God, a loving God, reaches down to rescue impotent sinners who cannot rescue themselves.

Do you remember how Paul wrote to Timothy, guard the gospel, guard the good deposit entrusted to you in the power of the Holy Spirit. That's the same here in Malachi.

The true Christian leader must have lips that guard knowledge. In other words, lips that keep on teaching the truth, that keep on showing how different the faith of the Bible is from the ways of the world.

[27 : 53] Then fourth, the true teacher walks with God. There it is. I think it's one of the gems of Malachi.

Partway through verse 6, he walked with me in peace and uprightness. That's the true leader. Adam was different. Adam ran from God, hid from him, ran from his presence.

But the true leader walks with God as Noah did and as Enoch did before him. The Bible pictures our threescore years and ten as a walk, a bit like a long tramp over the hills.

It's a long way to Tipperary and it's a pretty long road from one's birth to the age of 70 or 80 or 90. But the true Christian leader, and this is equally true of every Christian, is invited to share every step of the long walk of life with the Lord himself.

Could there be a better companion to have on the long march? Isn't life transformed if the Lord himself goes with us? As we walk, we look at him and he looks at us and we love him because he first loved us.

[29 : 08] And his presence with us encourages us along the road, especially when the road gets steep and difficult. He keeps us going. And when we're tempted to fall into sin, his presence with us will strengthen our spines and help us to hate the things that he hates, the sinful things.

And that's why verse 6 makes this connection between uprightness and walking with him. If he is our companion, then we shall want to please him. To walk with him is to walk in the way of peace and uprightness.

So the leader of God's people needs to live very close to the Lord as his friend and companion and joy. Then fifth, the true leader turns many from iniquity.

We're still here in verse 6. He walked with me in peace and uprightness and he turned many from iniquity. The Christian leader who preaches the Bible and the Gospel is committed to the task of turning people.

Remember how Jesus speaks in Matthew chapter 7 of the two gates that lead on to the two roads which lead on to the two destinations. The wide gate gives on to the broad road which leads to destruction whereas the narrow gate leads to the narrow road which leads to life.

[30 : 30] And the Gospel preacher cries out to those who are on the broad road. He urges them to turn from it, to turn from iniquity, to turn from the broad road and go through the narrow gate which leads to the narrow path which leads to life.

And notice in verse 6 here that the true Levi, the true leader of God's people turns many from iniquity and then contrast that influence with that of the corrupt leader in verse 8 who causes many to stumble by his so-called instruction.

So the many of verse 6 and the many of verse 8 show that a leader's influence can be far-reaching for good or for bad. To give true instruction from the Scriptures will turn many people from iniquity, will set many pairs of feet on the path that leads to heaven.

But the corrupt leader makes many stumble. They lose their footing, they lose their way, they lose everything in the end. Just think of those who have taught you the truth over the years.

don't you thank God for them with all your heart. It's they who have set our feet on the highway to heaven. Their true instruction has turned our feet from iniquity.

[31 : 48] They cried out to us, turn! And we turned. And then lastly from verse 7, the true leader is sought out by others as their instructor.

Here's verse 7 again. For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge and people should seek instruction from his mouth for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts.

When the liberating gracious truth of the Bible is being regularly taught, people will develop a hunger for it and they will seek out the faithful instructor.

They become a bit like sheep who have discovered where the best grass grows. So they go again and again to that particular spot where the grass grows and they don't come away disappointed.

Mind you, we can't assume that where there is a large crowd there is necessarily a good instructor. You remember Paul warns Timothy that in the last days people will develop itching ears and they will gather around themselves large numbers of teacher to suit their own passions.

[32 : 54] So a loud voice being listened to by a large crowd is no guarantee of true instruction that it's taking place. But where the Bible is truly taught those who want to hear the voice of God will gather and they will seek out says Malachi the instruction from the mouth of the godly teacher.

About ten years ago I came across a very striking little quotation from the 17th century which describes the kind of godly teacher whose instruction will be sought out.

And ever since then I've kept this little quotation on a slip of blue paper in the back of my sermon notes folder to remind me of the kind of man the Christian preacher needs to be. Let me read it to you.

A man four square immovable at all times so that they who in the midst of many opinions have lost the view of true religion may return to him and there find it.

So Malachi in the midst of his denunciations of the corrupt leader gives us this delightful portrait which emerges of the true Levi the man of God's covenant who faithfully teaches the people.

[34 : 13] He has the honour of the Lord in his heart he values the covenant he teaches the truth and guards knowledge he walks with God he turns many from iniquity and his instruction is sought out.

Now isn't that the kind of leadership which our churches throughout the land need today? And on this day as we mourn Jim Phillips' death isn't it right that we should honour him too and recognise that he was a Christian leader of exactly this kind?

And shouldn't we pray that the Lord would multiply numbers of such leaders for our churches? Not many of course will have the wide ranging influence of a Jim Phillips you don't get many Jim Phillips to the pound but if the churches of Scotland by God's grace could multiply this kind of leadership for the upcoming generations it would mean great blessing for this country.

Verse 6 again True instruction was in his mouth and no wrong was found on his lips he walked with me in peace and righteousness and he turned many from iniquity for the lips of a priest should guard knowledge and people should seek instruction from his mouth why?

for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts Let's pray together Dear God our Father we thank you so much for those faithful people who have taught us the scriptures over the years we thank you for their devotion and dedication and the joy of their lives their example and influence and how we pray that you will raise up many in the future including many from this very gathering here tonight who will be prepared to take on a role humbly a role of leadership and teaching and preaching for your people and we pray that our churches in this land and further afield too might be greatly blessed because there are those who love you love your covenant and love to pass on right instruction from the scriptures we ask these things in Jesus name

[36 : 36] Amen Amen