

## The Lips of a Priest

Malachi 2:1-9

Pastor Jason Van Bommel

*“And now, O priests, this command is for you. <sup>2</sup> If you will not listen, if you will not take it to heart to give honor to my name, says the LORD of hosts, then I will send the curse upon you and I will curse your blessings. Indeed, I have already cursed them, because you do not lay it to heart. <sup>3</sup> Behold, I will rebuke your offspring, and spread dung on your faces, the dung of your offerings, and you shall be taken away with it. <sup>4</sup> So shall you know that I have sent this command to you, that my covenant with Levi may stand, says the LORD of hosts. <sup>5</sup> My covenant with him was one of life and peace, and I gave them to him. It was a covenant of fear, and he feared me. He stood in awe of my name. <sup>6</sup> True instruction was in his mouth, and no wrong was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and he turned many from iniquity. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> But you have turned aside from the way. You have caused many to stumble by your instruction. You have corrupted the covenant of Levi, says the LORD of hosts, <sup>9</sup> 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.”*

- Malachi 2:1-9, ESV

The structure of our passage today is a classic Hebrew chiasm, which means the beginning and the end are similar/parallel to each other and the most important part is in the middle. In this case, our passage begins and ends with God’s pronouncement of judgment against the wicked and faithless priests, while the middle focuses on God’s covenant with the Levitical priesthood and the call of the priest. So, verses 4-7 are the heart of this passage, with verses 1-3 and 8-9 serving as the judgment framework for the call of the middle verses.

### A. The Cursed Corruption (vv. 1-3, 8-9)

God begins and ends this message with His pronouncement of judgment against His priests. He has already included the priests in His condemnation of His people’s worship as worthless; after all, if the worship was worthless, the priests do bear the bulk of that responsibility, for it was their task to oversee the worship of God and guard its purity. In chapter 1, the focus was on the failure of the priests in properly leading worship and offering blemished sacrifices to God. Here in chapter 2, it is on their failure to teach God’s law properly and in misleading the people of God by their teaching.

#### I. Refusing to Honor God’s Name

The real heart of the reason for God’s judgment against the priests is given in verse 2: *“If you will not listen, if you will not take it to heart to give honor to my name, says the LORD of hosts, then I will send the curse upon you”* The priests needed to take it to heart to give honor to the name of the Lord. This means that, from their hearts, they were refusing to honor God’s name.

God’s name is a way of referring to God’s character and honor, to His person. A refusal to honor God’s name is a refusal to honor God Himself, His person and His character. God’s name is holy for God is holy, and the priests were set apart by God for the express purpose of honoring His holy name. In Leviticus 21:6, at the institution of the priesthood under Aaron, Moses is told of the priests: *“They shall be holy to their God and not profane the name of their God. For they offer the Lord’s food offerings, the bread of their God; therefore they shall*

be holy.” In 1 Chronicles 23:13, we’re told why God chose and set apart Aaron, the brother of Moses, and his sons: “Aaron was set apart to dedicate the most holy things, that he and his sons forever should make offerings before the Lord and minister to him and pronounce blessings in his name forever.”

In their failure to treat the things of God as holy and to faithfully discharge their duties, the sons of Aaron, the Levitical priests, were refusing to honor the name of the Lord. They were focused on doing so many other things and not focused on doing the most important thing, honoring the name of the Lord.

So, how exactly have the priests refused to honor God’s name? In chapter 1, we were shown that they were willing to pollute the worship of God’s altar by offering defiled, blind, lame, worthless animals. In chapter 2, the focus shifts to their teaching. The priests are told, in verses 8-9, “*But you have turned aside from the way. You have caused many to stumble by your instruction. You have corrupted the covenant of Levi, says the LORD of hosts, 9 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.*”

## 2. Showing Partiality in Instruction

The priests were showing partiality in their instruction. That is, they were shaping their teaching to coddle the wealthy who could enrich them. James speaks against this kind of partiality among church leaders:

*My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, “You sit here in a good place,” while you say to the poor man, “You stand over there,” or, “Sit down at my feet,” have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor man. (James 2:1-6, ESV)*

These priests realized they could make more money and enrich themselves if they tailored their teaching of the Law to cater to the rich. They promoted the idea that riches were a key indicator of God’s blessing and favor. Their early version of the prosperity gospel led most Israelites to believe that rich people were specially favored by God. It was so bad that, when Jesus taught that it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven, His disciples responded by asking, “Who, then, can be saved?” Notice, they didn’t ask, “How can we be saved?” but “Who, then, can be saved?” In other words, if salvation is so difficult for wealthy people, who stands a chance? Behind their question is the widely held assumption that wealthy people were specially favored by God and closer to God.

## 3. Causing Many to Stumble

Their partiality in their instruction is described as causing “many to stumble.” Psalm 119:105 says, “*Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.*” It was the job of the priests to instruct God’s people in the law. Yet selfish motives caused these priests to distort God’s law, thus dimming the light God’s people need to walk and causing them to stumble. Psalm 119:32 says, “*I will run in the way of your commandments,*” but God’s people can’t run in a way they can’t clearly see.

And so God curses His priests, saying that He will curse their offspring and will turn their blessings into a curse. Perhaps these priests were tempted to twist God’s law for selfish gain for the sake of their children. Every

parent wants to provide a secure future for their children, but God lets these priests know that failing to honor His name and teach His word rightly will not lead them to a blessing for their children. Instead, their children will be cursed.

The priests also took pride in what their office and their calling allowed them to do – to offer sacrifices on God’s altar and to pronounce blessing on God’s people. When people came to the Temple to worship, these are the two things they looked forward to doing – handing their sacrifice to the priest to have it offered up to God and then, at the end of their worship, to receive the blessing of God from the priest. But a priest who refuses to honor God’s name, who refuses to guard God’s worship or rightly teach His word, has no right to offer up sacrifices to God or to bless God’s people – and so God pronounces His curse right on the heart of that which made the priest proud of their work, on their offerings and on their blessing.

### **B. The Covenant Call (vv. 4-7)**

Contrasted with these miserable, failing priests, God reminds them of His covenant and of the ideal priests who in the past served Him:

*<sup>4</sup> So shall you know that I have sent this command to you, that my covenant with Levi may stand, says the LORD of hosts. <sup>5</sup> My covenant with him was one of life and peace, and I gave them to him. It was a covenant of fear, and he feared me. He stood in awe of my name. <sup>6</sup> True instruction was in his mouth, and no wrong was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and he turned many from iniquity. <sup>7</sup> 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.*

This central part of our passage does present a central point of confusion: We have no record of God entering into a covenant with Levi, the son of Jacob, in the book of Genesis. In fact, the record we have of Levi himself in Genesis is not a flattering one at all. So, what is this “covenant with Levi” and who is this ideal priest described here?

The “covenant with Levi” probably refers to the covenant made with the Tribe of Levi and the House of Aaron under the Mosaic Law. Moses and Aaron were both sons of Levi, and Moses was given God’s law, while Aaron and his sons were given the priesthood, to lead the worship of God. In Deuteronomy 10:8, we’re told, “*At that time the Lord set apart the tribe of Levi to carry the ark of the covenant of the Lord to stand before the Lord to minister to him and to bless in his name, to this day.*”

What was the “at that time” referred to by Moses in Deuteronomy 10? Moses is recalling the time when he came down from Mount Sinai with the Law of God written by the hand of God on tablets of stone to find the Israelites worshipping a Golden Calf. Moses called out, “Who’s on the Lord’s side?” and the Tribe of Levi stepped forward to stand for the Lord. This boldness to stand apart from the people and for the Lord, even to execute His wrath on their neighbors, was the occasion when God chose them and made His covenant with Levi.

The ideal priest depicted here, then, could be Aaron himself, although Aaron’s track-record as high priest was far from spotless. Still, even though Aaron had made the Golden Calf for the people, he realized his error and repented. Several other later priests served well, and the picture here could be an idealized compilation of faithful priests like Aaron, Eli, Samuel, Abiathar, Joshua, and Ezra.

## **I. The Ideal Priest**

This ideal priest is described first as one who feared God and stood in awe of His name. Again, we see this is the heart of the matter: To fear the Lord and live in awe of His name. Everything else flows from this core. With this heart, all else falls in place; without this heart, nothing else will ever be right, no matter how good it may look from the outside. Only from this heart that fears the Lord can right ministry then flow: *“True instruction was in his mouth, and no wrong was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and he turned many from iniquity.”*

Ultimately, we know the only priest who perfectly and unwaveringly embodied this ideal was the Lord Jesus Christ, our eternal Great High Priest, who has been made High Priest forever by the purity of His indestructible life.

## **2. The Call to the Priest**

The call to the priests in Malachi’s day was to imitate this ideal priest. Ezra had been a recent example for them, as he feared the Lord and taught His law rightly. For the priest, the line of faithfulness and fruitfulness flows from the heart directly to the lips –

*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.*

## **C. Our Contemporary Context**

So, how do we take this powerful passage and apply it to ourselves today?

### **I. For Pastors**

The first and most obvious application is for pastors and Bible teachers. Earlier this week, I changed my profile picture on the YouVersion Bible app to this quote from John Owen: “The first and principal duty of a pastor is to feed the flock by diligent preaching of the word.” And I am reminded that the fruit of my lips must flow from a heart that fears the Lord and a life lived in awe of HIM.

The temptation for a pastor to teach God’s law with partiality is no less real today than it was in Malachi’s day. People-pleasing is the constant temptation of the preacher, especially if you care about people and care about what people think of you. I like people, and I like to be liked by people.

In the face of this temptation, the call is clear, and we have the best example of all, the One who ever lives to make intercession for us: We are to honor God’s name by fearing Him, standing in awe of Him, and teaching His word with clarity and faithfulness. We are never to teach God’s word with partiality, never darken His counsel with human agendas and so cause His people to stumble. People should be able to come to their pastor and seek the Lord’s teaching. What does the Lord say? The pastor is indeed the messenger of the Lord of Hosts, called by Him to teach His people.

### **2. For People**

And yet, the application of this passage is not just for pastors and spiritual leaders, those who teach God’s word

for a living. In the new covenant era, all believers are priests. Jesus has shed His blood to make us a kingdom of priests. Peter says of all believers in 1 Peter 2:9 – “*you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*” This is not a word for pastors and “religious professionals;” it is for all believers.

That means that you, too, are called to fear the Lord and to stand in awe of Him. In your conversations with unbelievers, you represent the Lord and His word. Are you tempted to be people-pleasers and “pull your punches” out of fear of man?

Faithful service as a priest of the Lord is a matter of the heart. Our hearts and minds must be overwhelmed with the joyful and fearful privilege of representing the Lord of Hosts. You are a messenger of the Lord of the Armies of Heaven! You are His child and His ambassador. He has set His love on you, has adopted you, and has called you to represent Him to the world.

How can we be worthy of such a tremendous calling? God’s grace has clothed us with the perfect righteousness of our Great High Priest, the Lord Jesus, the perfect Ambassador of Heaven. Jesus prays for us before the Father day and night. So, we must worship Him, fix our eyes on Him, draw strength from His Spirit who indwells us, saturate our minds with His word (for how can we teach that which we do not know), and then speak the truth in love.

We also need to remember that it’s not our responsibility to worry about the results. God will take care of building His kingdom as He sees fit. Just as we are not the authors of Scripture, so we are not the producers of fruit. As Paul said in 1 Corinthians 3:5-7: “*What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.*”

We have His promise that He will never allow His word to fail to accomplish His purpose:

*“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven  
and do not return there but water the earth,  
making it bring forth and sprout,  
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,  
<sup>11</sup> so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;  
it shall not return to me empty,  
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,  
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*

<sup>12</sup> *“For you shall go out in joy  
and be led forth in peace;  
the mountains and the hills before you  
shall break forth into singing,  
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.*

*13 Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;  
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;  
and it shall make a name for the LORD,  
an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off."*

So, let's look to Him, stand in awe of Him, and trust Him!