THE REQUIREMENTS FOR SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

Malachi 2:1-9

By

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We live in a day of crisis in church leadership. The Episcopal Church has voted to install a practicing homosexual bishop. The Roman Catholic Church has been in the news frequently because of their extensive cover-ups of priests who have molested children. But it hits much closer to home, in that a local missions leader, who formerly had served as an elder here, went to prison this year for molesting young girls.

The statistics on sexual sin among pastors are staggering. In 1988, Leadership [Winter, p. 12] conducted a survey among pastors. They asked, “Since you’ve been in local church ministry, have you ever done anything with someone (not your spouse) that you feel was sexually inappropriate?” Almost one in four (23%) answered yes! They asked, “Have you ever had sexual intercourse with someone other than your spouse since you’ve been in local-church ministry?” Almost one in eight (12%) answered yes! They asked the same questions among those who are not pastors and found that the incidences of immorality were almost double (45% & 23%)! They also found (p. 24) that 20 percent of pastors viewed sexually oriented media at least once a month (this was before the internet)!

Is it any wonder that the American church lacks God’s blessing? It is crucial for us to understand and implement the biblical requirements for spiritual leadership in our churches. God may call some of you young men into pastoral ministry. You should be diligent to develop these qualities in your lives now. It is vitally important that every Christian know what to look for in a pastor. Apart from the matter of moral purity, there are many men in pastoral ministry who do not meet the biblical requirements for spiritual leadership. If you place yourself and your family under such leadership, it could be spiritually devastating.

People join churches for flimsy reasons. Sometimes they join a church because they like the feeling they get when they attend there. They find the music entertaining and uplifting. Maybe they like the pastor’s personality or sense of humor. Or they like the
youth activities that are available. Often, they join because their best friends go there. But strangely, they never consider what the pastor is teaching or where he is leading them spiritually.

Malachi 2:1-9 tells you what to look for in spiritual leaders. These verses were aimed at the spiritually lax priests. In the Old Testament, the priests were to be the spiritual leaders of God’s people. In the church age, Jesus has fulfilled and superceded the Levitical priesthood. He is our High Priest and all believers are priests under Him (Heb. 7& 8; 1 Pet. 2:9). God now has entrusted leadership in the local church to elders who are to shepherd His flock. Among the elders, some are to focus on preaching and teaching God’s Word (1 Tim. 5:17). They are called pastor-teachers and their responsibility is to equip God’s saints for the work of ministry (Greek, Eph. 4:11-12). In that role, they carry on the work that these priests should have been doing in Malachi’s day. To sum up, the prophet shows us:

A spiritual leader must honor God by walking with Him and teaching His truth or he will incur God’s discipline.

Our text is an Old Testament treatment of 1 Timothy 4:16, “Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching,” coupled with James 3:1: “Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment.”

1. A spiritual leader must honor God by walking with Him.

The primary requirement for a pastor-teacher is not that a man be a gifted communicator, but rather that he walks closely with the Lord. John Calvin said that it would be better for the preacher to break his neck going into the pulpit, if he does not take pains to be the first to follow God (cited by J. I. Packer, A Quest for Godliness [Crossway Books], p. 76).

Here God contrasts the priests of Malachi’s day with the Levitical priests who had walked with God in peace and uprightness (2:6). The phrase “to walk with” God is used only of Enoch (Gen. 5:22, 24) and Noah (Gen. 6:9), although God commanded Abraham, “Walk before Me, and be blameless” (Gen. 17:1). To walk with God implies close, intimate fellowship with God and obedience to His commandments or ways (Mal. 2:9).
Walking with God is connected with honoring Him. When God confronted Eli the priest because he did not confront his evil sons, God said, “I did indeed say that your house and the house of your father should walk before Me forever.” But the Lord continues, “Far be it from Me—for those who honor Me I will honor, and those who despise Me will be lightly esteemed” (1 Sam. 2:30). Our text reveals five aspects of walking with God:

A. Walking with God is based on a covenant relationship with God in life and peace.

When Malachi mentions Levi, he is not referring to the man, but to the line of priests that descended from him. Although there is no specific text where God instituted a covenant with the Levitical priests (Mal. 2:4, 5, 8), several passages presuppose such a covenant (Jer. 33:20-21; Neh. 13:29). God chose the tribe of Levi for ministry in the sanctuary and thus put them in a special covenant relationship with Him.

Because the Levites sided with Moses in the incident of the golden calf, Moses pronounced a blessing on them and said that they would teach God’s ordinances to Israel (Exod. 32:25-29; 33:8-11). Later (Num. 25:1-15) Israel was led into idolatry by joining themselves to Moabite women. Just as the nation was bowing in repentance, an Israelite man brazenly took a Midianite woman into his tent in the sight of all the people. Out of zeal for God’s honor, Phinehas, a grandson of Aaron, took a spear, went into the tent, and executed this immoral couple. God was pleased and said, “Behold, I give him My covenant of peace; and it shall be for him and his descendants after him, a covenant of perpetual priesthood, because he was jealous for his God and made atonement for the sons of Israel” (Num. 25:12-13).

Applied to New Testament church leaders, a man who leads in the church must be in a genuine covenant of life and peace with God. Being a Christian is not just a matter of “making a decision to accept Christ.” It is a matter of God imparting new life to a man who was dead in his sins (Eph. 2:1-3). With that new life is relationship of peace with God through the blood of Christ (Rom. 5:1). This New Covenant relationship of life and peace with God is foundational to walking with God.
B. Walking with God implies close communion with Him.

This is implicit in the term. The select men of whom this term is used (Enoch, Noah, and Abraham) knew God closely, as friend to friend. There is a vast difference between knowledge about God and knowing God personally. There is a huge difference between a religious man, who keeps all sorts of rules and rituals, and a man who walks closely with the living God. Those who lead God’s people must be careful to maintain communion with God and not fall into the trap of religious activity.

C. Walking with God results in a growing reverence for Him.

God says that He gave this covenant of life and peace to the priests “as an object of reverence; so he revered me, and stood in awe of My name” (2:5). I think that we over-emphasize God’s love to the neglect of fearing Him. There is a biblical balance, of course, but I don’t see us over-emphasizing the fear of God to the neglect of His love. Scripture says, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding” (Prov. 9:10). “The fear of the Lord is to hate evil” (Prov. 8:13a). “Do not let your heart envy sinners, but live in the fear of the Lord always” (Prov. 23:17).

There is an appropriate place for humor in the pulpit, but there is never an appropriate time to make light of sin or to joke about God. A spiritual leader must be sober in all things (2 Tim. 4:5). While that does not mean that he should be devoid of a sense of humor, it does mean that he should convey a dead seriousness when it comes to the eternal destiny of souls. Jesus said, “Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt. 10:28). God is not to be trifled with!

D. Walking with God produces a passion to honor His name above all else.

God exhorts these priests to take it to heart to give honor to His name (2:2). As we saw last week, they were despising God by offering blemished sacrifices on the altar. The Hebrew word for “honor” (or, “glory”) comes from a word meaning “heavy” or “weighty.” When used of persons it has the connotation of someone being weighty or impressive, and thus worthy of respect. God
is worthy of all honor and glory since He is the most weighty, awe-
some Being in the universe. Again Malachi repeats the title, “the
Lord of hosts” (2:2, 4, 7, 8), which refers to the fact that God
commands all the armies of heaven and He directs all of the galax-
ies in the universe. Our aim as His people should be to make His
glory known to all people. Our lives and our teaching should honor
His name (= all that He is), and we should be careful not to do
anything that would dishonor our great God and Savior.

Thus walking with God is based on a covenant relationship
with Him in life and peace. It implies close communion with Him.
It results in a growing reverence for Him and a passion to honor
His name.

E. Walking with God means listening to Him and obeying
Him from the heart.

God warns these priests that they need to listen and take it to
heart to give honor to His name. To drive it home, He repeats the
warning about not taking it to heart (2:2). The word “listen” is of-
ten synonymous with the word “obey,” but it alerts us to the fact
that we will not obey God unless we first hear what His Word tells
us. That’s why Jesus often said, “He who has ears to hear, let him
hear,” and, “Take care how you listen” (Luke 8:8, 18). Our sin
causes us to ignore His warnings and go on doing what we want to
do, even though it will ultimately cause us much grief and sorrow.
Those who lead God’s flock must be in His Word, applying it to
their own hearts first.

These things elaborate on Paul’s word, “Pay close attention to
yourself” (1 Tim. 4:16). Honor God by walking with Him. But also
he told Timothy to pay close attention to his teaching.

2. A spiritual leader must honor God by teaching His truth.

Sound teaching must flow out of a godly life. As the Puritan
pastor Richard Baxter put it, “Is that man likely to do much good,
or fit to be a minister of Christ, that will speak for Him an hour,
and by his life will preach against Him all the week beside?” (A
Puritan Golden Treasury, compiled by I. D. E. Thomas [Banner of
Truth], p. 191.) God drives home to these disobedient priests that
He expected them to give true instruction and turn many back
from iniquity (2:6). The priest should preserve knowledge, so that
men would seek instruction from his mouth; “for he is the messenger of the Lord” (2:7). And, he should not show partiality in his teaching (2:9). Note four things:

A. A teacher of God’s truth speaks God’s message, not his own.

This is implied in the word “commandment” (2:1, 4), as well as in the statement that the priest was “the messenger of the Lord of hosts” (2:7). God’s commandments are not “helpful hints for happy living,” similar to articles that you might find in Reader’s Digest! God’s standards for right and wrong are not a matter of personal preference. God tells us with authority how we should live, and we violate His commandments to our own peril.

In those days, before modern communication, kings would send out messengers to relay the king’s message to the people. The messenger was not free to make up his own version of the king’s word. If he didn’t like the king’s message, he couldn’t tone it down or tweak it to make it more popular with the people. The job of the messenger was to relay accurately and clearly what the king wanted to be said.

The job of a pastor is faithfully and accurately to explain and apply God’s Word to his hearers. If it’s in the text of Scripture, I am not free to dodge it or modify it, even if I know that it will offend some people.

Although I strongly disagree with some of his theology, I have long admired what I read about the famous theologian, Karl Barth. He was a pastor in Germany just prior to World War II, when Hitler was fanning the flames of anti-Semitism. Sadly, many professing Christians in Germany agreed with Hitler against the Jews.

One Sunday, Barth was preaching on John 3:16. He made the point that Jesus was a Jew, that He had died for all the world, and that the Jews were of the world. Thus anyone who loves Christ would not participate in the widespread ill treatment of the Jews. Many in Barth’s congregation walked out in disgust before he finished his sermon. One wrote a scathing letter denouncing his sermon. Barth’s reply was a single sentence: “It was in the text.”

That’s how you should evaluate any sermon: Did it come out of the text of Scripture? If it accurately explained and applied the
text in its context, then even if it stomped on your toes, it was a good sermon, because it was God’s Word through His messenger. I always try to tell you when there is room to differ over a difficult text or a doctrine where godly men differ. Jim Elliot said it well when he wrote at age 22, “Forbid, Lord, that any of those to whom I minister should be so foolish as to take my word as though it were Thine; or so daring as to set aside Thy word as though it were mine” (Shadow of the Almighty, Elisabeth Elliot [Zondervan], p. 120).

B. A teacher of God’s truth preserves the knowledge of God and His ways.

“The lips of a priest should preserve knowledge” (2:7), which refers to the knowledge of God and His will as revealed in His Word. “Preserve” has the idea of storing up or treasuring in the mind the principles of God’s Word and the knowledge of Him.

In a society where copies of God’s Word were rare and expensive, it was especially important for the priests to preserve and pass on to the people the knowledge of God and His ways. But it is also important in our day, when only one in five Protestants read their Bibles daily. After sleeping and working, the thing that Americans do most is to watch TV! While I hope that is not true of any of you, you cannot resist picking up the ways of the world that barrage you daily unless you saturate your mind with God’s truth. If a pastor does not teach the knowledge of God and His ways through the Word, you should find another pastor.

C. A teacher of God’s truth turns many back from iniquity.

“He turned many back from iniquity” (2:6). God’s Word is clear that our major problem is not low self-esteem or a poor environment. Our major problem is our sinful rebellion against the Lord of hosts. Any pastor who does not help people deal biblically with their sin is not honoring God by teaching His truth.

That’s one good reason for teaching straight through a book of the Bible instead of giving topical messages. If I preach topical messages, you may think that I’m singling out your particular problem. But if I’m working through a book of the Bible, and it confronts a specific sin, then “it was in the text”!

For example, to alert you about upcoming attractions, in Malachi we will deal next week with the sin of marrying unbelievers
and then with the sin of divorce. Later, we’ll get into the sin of robbing God by not giving faithfully to His work. I wouldn’t choose these topics if I wanted to win popularity contests! But, they’re in the text, and if I am a faithful pastor, I will not dodge them. Martin Luther said, “Always preach in such a way that if the people listening do not come to hate their sin, they will instead hate you” (in David Larsen, The Company of the Preachers [Kregel], p. 157).

D. A preacher of God’s truth is impartial.

God rebukes these disobedient priests for “showing partiality in the instruction” (2:9). Micah (3:11) confronted the same problem: “Her leaders pronounce judgment for a bribe, her priests instruct for a price, and her prophets divine for money.” In other words, for a price they would tell people whatever they wanted to hear, not what they needed to hear.

A man who teaches God’s truth will not soften the message to cater to the influential or wealthy in the congregation. That is one reason that I purpose not to know who gives what in this church. But even if I knew that you were the largest donor in the church and that you would be offended by what I say, if it is in the biblical text that I’m preaching on, I’m still going to confront your sin. Not to do so would be unfaithful to God. If I’m unfaithful to God, I cannot expect His blessing on my life or ministry.

3. If a spiritual leader does not honor God, he will incur God’s discipline.

God tells these priests that He will send a curse on them, by cursing their blessing (2:2), cursing their offspring (or seed; 2:3), and by cursing their ministry (2:3, 9). God’s discipline is actually an expression of His love (Prov. 3:12), but it can be pretty severe!

By cursing their blessings, the Lord is referring either to taking away their material blessings, such as food, covering, and possessions; or, to making these otherwise good things to be a curse. If you are obedient to the Lord, possessions, health, and a peaceful life are blessings from God to be enjoyed thankfully. But if you disregard God, those same things can be a curse because they become the source of your contentment, rather than God Himself.

Cursing their offspring (lit., “seed”) may refer to God’s curse on their crops or to His judgment on their children (both are men-
tioned in Deut. 28:18). God brought judgment on Eli’s wicked sons and on their descendants, because he would not rebuke them (1 Sam. 2:31-34). So Eli’s tolerance toward his sons, which he would have said was love, was really hatred. If he had loved them, he would have honored God by confronting their sins. Sadly, many pastor’s children go astray because their fathers have not honored God by living and teaching His truth in the home.

God gets pretty graphic by saying that He will spread refuse or dung on the faces of the priests and cause them to be despised and abased in front of all the people. These proud priests were trying to keep up their image as important and influential men. But God will expose them for what they are, defiled and unclean. Whenever a pastor’s sin gets exposed publicly, you know that he didn’t just suddenly fall. God is exposing in public what has been going on behind the scenes for a long time. “Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment” (James 3:1)!

**Conclusion**

A. W. Tozer wrote, “Save me from the curse of compromise, of imitation, of professionalism. Save me from the error of judging a church by its size, its popularity or the amount of its yearly offering. Help me to remember that I am a prophet—not a promoter, not a religious manager, but a prophet” (“The Prayer of a Minor Prophet”). That is the essence of spiritual leadership, to honor God by walking with Him and teaching His truth. “Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching” (1 Tim. 4:16)!

**Discussion Questions**

1. How can we know when we are in balance on the matter of God’s love and fearing Him?
2. What are the most important biblical criteria in looking for a church?
3. Why must a faithful pastor confront sin in his preaching?
4. When, if ever, should a pastor who has fallen into serious sin be restored to the ministry?