

**Malachi 2:5-9**  
**Keeping the Word of God Central: A Practical Plan of Attack**  
Jimmy Snowden  
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**Introduction**

This is the third and final sermon in the series “Keeping the Word of Central: A Practical Plan of Attack.” This series is a practical application of the truth set forth in Malachi 2:5-9. In Malachi 2:5-9 we saw the foundation of Israel’s depravity and corruption, the misplacement of the word of God from their lives and ministry. Thus far in Malachi we have seen both the depth to which the Israelites had fallen (Malachi 1:6-2:5) and the catalyst for their failure (Malachi 2:5-9). As stated 3 weeks ago, it is easy to get frustrated with the Israelites because of their failed approach to God’s word until we put the magnified glass on our own hearts.

Over the past two weeks, we have been trying to uncover those things which most commonly fence us off from what we need for our souls to thrive and survive, the Bible. Thus far we have looked at 4 of the most common things which keep the people of God from feasting upon his word. Today we will be looking at two more. For the sake of reminder: The first week we looked at (1) *Insufficient Information* (which was a reference to the fact that although most Christians know their need for the word of God enough to be able to affirm it, their understanding of why it is so important is not deep enough to drive them to it) and (2) *Polarized Priorities* (one of the things that keeps the people of God from a meaningful pursuit of his word is that they have not adopted God’s priorities for their lives. We saw from Deuteronomy 6 that God’s priorities for our lives are a love for him and a love for his word. We discussed the fact that your schedule reflects your priorities. Thus, although most people complain that they do not have time enough to read God’s word, their primary problem is not lack of time, but rather that their priorities are polar opposites of the priorities of Scripture. If you adopt God’s priorities for you life, you will make time for his word). Last week we looked at (3) *Addictive Amusement: A Slackers Satisfaction* (We discussed the fact that we often times only pursue God’s word in so far as it is easy. However, as soon as the Bible takes any sort of work, as soon as it does not hold our interest, we tend to put the bible down and do something a bit more interesting. We also looked at Hebrews 6 and discussed the grave consequences of being lazy in our approach to God’s word) and (4) *Lonely Labors* (we discussed the fact that God never intended for us to walk the Christian life alone. He has given us each other to hold each other up and bear each others burdens. Many people struggle with reading the word of God because they have no accountability partner to walk beside them).

Today we are going to be looking at three other things which keep the people of God from his word.

**Reason #5: Wasted Work: An Irritating Investment**

*Diagnosing the Problem:*

Last week we talked about *Addictive Amusement: A Slacker’s Satisfaction*. That message was intended for those whose laziness keeps them from pursuing God through his word. Today I will be addressing those whose difficulty in pursuing a knowledge of

God through his word has less to do with laziness and more to do with the feeling that their time in the word of God is profitless. I mean, you have no problem putting work into your relationship with God through his word, and yet you feel that the time you spend in God's word is a waste because it seems to go so far over your head.

I have had many people tell me that the one thing which keeps them from feasting upon the word of God is the small return they get in return for their efforts. I have heard many Christians complain that the Bible is too difficult for them to follow. "After all, I don't even get anything out of it. When I go there, it goes right over my head!" Each time you go to the word of God you feel more confused than before, have more unanswered questions than before, feel more clueless than before, and you just really haven't a clue as to how what you have read is significant for your life. You feel that you are treading water, running a marathon in knee deep mud, cutting your steak with a green bean, drying off with a baby wipe.

I can readily identify with such frustration. When I was in college I had two bible devotions a day: 45 minutes in the morning and 45 minutes in the evening. I would read 5 chapters in the morning and then the same 5 chapters at night. The reason I would do so was because my 45 minute devotional in the morning left me with more unanswered questions than what I knew to do with. During this time my knowledge of the word of God sky rocketed. I knew what the Scriptures said. I could quote them with ease. People would come to me all the time asking where they could locate this or that verse. Without a moments hesitation I would provide them the exact reference. But you see, although I knew what the Scriptures said, I had a very small understanding of what the Scriptures meant when it said what it said. Every morning I would read my bible, but would hardly ever leave with a sense of accomplishment. Every morning as I took my walk up to Crouch Hall I would find myself praying to the Lord with expectation, "Oh Lord, please help me understand what I read this morning. I pray that today would be the day when the Bible is no longer an impossible puzzle. Oh Lord, open my eyes to the truth of your word."

It would be a mistake for anyone to think that my Bible reading was a waste of time. It is not as if the Bible *never* made sense to me. No, sometimes God would forge His way into my little mind; however this was not the norm. And surely, every morning God would give me little nuggets of truth to think about and lean upon throughout the day. However, I was confused and frustrated as a general rule. I really felt as if I were treading water, running a marathon through knee-deep mud. At times I would even question, "Is all of this work worth it? Am I ever going to get to a point where I am able to understand God's word?" Thankfully, every time these thoughts came into my mind I would resolve that God was not going to see my work wasted.

How many of you can identify with me in this? You feel frustrated with the word of God; you feel that you have lost more battles with the word of God than you have won; you have an overall disappointed feeling about the word of God because you feel that it is inaccessible, over your head; you wonder and ask God if there will ever come a time when meaning and significance will jump out at you. Simply put, you just don't feel that you are getting much in return for your labors.

*Prescribing a Solution:*

1. Immediate Dividends: The one overwhelmed by *Wasted Work* ought to consider the culture in which we live: we live in a day and age where people want every little ounce of effort to pay immediate dividends. Isn't this clearly seen with all of the commercials promising that you will lose 60 pounds in 3 days if you just take this certain pill or drink that certain shake? When I was in college I, along with one of my good friends, did the Atkins diet. We both wanted to lose a few rolls and so we took the Atkins challenge. The amazing thing about the Atkins diet is that although we both lost about 25 pounds in about 2 months, about 2 months after we got off the diet all of the weight we lost came back. Do you want some good advice about how to lose weight? It ain't going to be flashy or easy! What you need to do is to adopt two things: a life-long diet and a life long exercise routine. Although the weight may go bye-bye slowly, life-long habits will keep it off. If instead of dumping \$10-20 a week into the lottery for the sake of winning an unlikely immediate financial estate, you could dump it into a low risk financial investment and have great confidence that you will be reaping a sum just as great as you would have if you won the lottery. But why do we prefer the hype of the lottery over/against the long term patience and endurance of wise investment? Why do we prefer the pills and the shakes over a life of consistent disciplines? Because, wise investments provide next to no promise of short term gain.

If you are in it for the long haul the lack of immediate and measurable understanding, progress, or success will not deter you from trudging along in God's word, even though it seems to bear little fruit. When I was in seminary one of my favorite teachers, Dr. Tomlinson, asked me, "Jimmy, why did you come here to get a seminary degree?" As opposed to answering the question, I inquired, "Well... you're the seminary professor... why should I be here." With a tremendous amount of wisdom he said, "Those students who come to Seminary to do nothing but learn everything they can about the Bible miss the point. My purpose as a teacher is not to teach you everything I know about the Bible, rather my purpose is to teach you a few principles and provide for you a few resources so that you might be equipped for a life-time of learning. Seminary has more to do with practicing basic principles and gathering resources than with learning details." He then said, "If you are not a lifelong learner, it would best for you not to go into the ministry." Isn't that interesting? Dr. Tomlinson understood something very profound and yet very unpopular, growing in the knowledge of the word of God is a life-long pursuit.

Do not expect the reading of Scripture to be a cakewalk. One of the interesting things that I have found is that the people of God give up so easy. You can give a group of people the task of reading through a book of the Bible (2 Corinthians, for example), and the next week they will come back defeated, confused, and unsure if they really want to continue. The interesting question I like to ask after giving such an assignment is this, "So, how did it go?!" The average response is cluttered with words like "confusing," "difficult," "over my head," "not for me," and other such language. My response is always the same, "It was hard? Of course it was! You are reading a document that was written 2000 years ago in a different language from a culture that is nothing like ours for the first time. Of course you struggled with it! You must remember, it was only the first time you read it. Keep plugging away." Give it time and work and you will become familiar with it. Invest into it. However, most people are irritated by the thought of long

term investment—they want immediate understanding and significance, no waiting periods.

I have an untested theory about the Greek language. Although it is untested I am 99% sure that I am correct. Actually, I ran it by Kevin this past week to make sure that he didn't think I was out to lunch. Good news! He didn't! One of the things that has boggled my mind since I have been in Seminary is how so few pastors make learning Greek and Hebrew a priority. Surely, certain pastors literally do not have the time to study the languages because they work full time jobs. However, there are many pastors who are supported full time for the express purpose of keeping the word of God central, and yet they do not pursue an ability to read God's word in its most pristine form. Most of these pastors would avidly espouse to Sola Scriptura (Scripture alone). And although they would lambaste the Catholics for giving greater priority to church tradition than to the word of God, many pastors make studying the great theologians of the past and present a greater priority than learning God's word in its most pristine form. Over the past few years I have, in my own little head, tried to figure this out. If you were to ask most pastors why they haven't learned Greek and/or Hebrew they would most likely respond, "Well, I am not a scholar. Greek is for scholars. I am not smart enough to learn New Testament Greek." The problem with this sort of an answer is that it is just not true. A good number of these same pastors who would answer this way have probably read books and/or sermons by Jonathan Edwards (*On the Freedom of the Will*), John Owen (*The Death of Death*), and many other puritans. They have probably read a good deal of what Martin Luther and John Calvin wrote. They probably have also read quite a bit on philosophy and culture: books like *The Gagging of God* by DA Carson and/or *The Francis Schaeffer Trilogy*. The problem here is that these books have posed a greater intellectual challenge to me than anything that I have come across in Greek. Don't get me wrong, there comes a point in your study of the Greek language where things become difficult. However, these books, and especially those written by Edwards, pose just as much, if not more, of a challenge. They also might answer, "Well, I just don't have enough time." But the interesting thing is that most pastors do have enough time, they are just spending it in the study of the theologians.

What, then, is the reason: why do pastors generally steer clear of the original languages? It has everything to do with irritating investments. You can pick up a Piper book, spend about 1 hour in it (a 1 hour investment), and come away with a whole new way of looking at the Christian life. A little challenge: (1) How many of you know of N.T. Wright? (2) How many of you know anything about *The New Perspective on Paul* and the controversy surrounding it? (3) How many of you know anything about second temple Judaism? The surprising thing is that if you were to sit down with Piper's new book, *The Future of Justification: A Response to N.T. Wright*, within 2 hours you could at least have an idea of who NT Wright is, something about *The New Perspective on Paul*, and a smidgeon about second temple Judaism. Why? Because Piper speaks your language, writes your language, and communicates in a way that is easily accessible by 21<sup>st</sup> Century Americans. Reading the theologians is convenient because they are so readily accessible, they pay immediate dividends. You can put a 2 hour investment into it and come out the other side being at least partially informed.

Greek, on the other hand, is an inconvenient investment. I am the equivalent of a 2<sup>nd</sup> year student of the Greek language (I actually have been studying it off and on for the

past 4 years). Even as a 2<sup>nd</sup> year student I am still just in the beginning stages of development with the Greek language. Most teachers will tell you that it takes an investment of about 4-6 years of daily study (depending upon how vigorous you pursue it) before a student can use the language with any sort of confidence, accuracy, and proficiency. Almost every Greek professor I have ever had has told us to not even begin to think or act like we know anything about the Greek language until we have studied it for at least 4-6 years. At this point all of my teachers would consider me to be dangerous—I know enough to be dangerous. This may give you a little window into why I hardly ever mention Greek from the pulpit—I am protecting you from my ignorance.

My intermediate Greek professor told me that if I decide to go the whole way with the Greek language that I would feel that I was wasting my time—I would question my investment. He said, “At the same time that you slowly progress, pouring your time and energy into the Greek language for 4-6 years, your friends will be progressing steadily as they study and invest in the theologians. You will feel like you are traveling at about 25 miles an hour while those beside you studying the theologians will be traveling at about 50 miles an hour. The investment will not appear to be worth it.” However, he informed me that after about 4-6 years of constant use, because of a much wiser investment, I will accelerate from about 25 miles an hour to about 150 miles an hour in about a year or two. He told me, “Make sure and wave to the theologians as you pass them!”

It’s all about investments. The wisest and best of investments are generally slow growing—they are long term. Generally speaking, the worst sort of investment that you can make in life is one that takes little work and yet profits you much in the short term. These sorts of investments are either so superficial that they prove to be useless or so risky that there is no stability. Meaningful investments—the best investments—cost you much in the beginning, but prosper you much in the long run. This is how it is with the word of God.

I am not sure if you looked at your Bible lately, but it is a big book. The Bible is a big book which was written between 3400-2000 years ago. Growing in a proficient knowledge of the word of God is not going to happen over night. When you first approach the word of God the majority of what you read probably will go over your head. However, this is to be expected. If you want to know God through his word you are going to have commit yourself to the difficult task of irritating investments. Get over it! The Bible is not always going to pay immediate dividends. I am not the sort of guy who is going to lie to you by telling you that reading the Bible is a walk in park. I am also not the sort of guy who is going to con you in to some sort of a quick-fix approach to reading the Bible so that everything immediately jumps off the page at you. Plain and simple, if you want a meaningful relationship with God through his word, you are going to have to make a long term investment. Without a doubt, if you make this investment, your labors will be marked with frustration, with a sense that you are paddling a canoe in a river of silly putty. However, if you stick it out and endure the frustration of irritating investments, your relationship with God through his word will flourish. You *will* become familiar with God’s word and you *will* learn to hear him speak to you through his word.

Thus, it is worth it to endure the frustration of Wasted Work, because the child of God who understands the nature of wise investment will see the end result and see that every hour spent running through the mud is a contribution to the investment. What is the

investment—a meaningful and vibrant relationship with God through an accurate knowledge of his word!

Hermeneutics: Many people struggle through the word of God simply because they do not know how to read it properly. Reading the Bible is much like playing the piano. There are rules that must be obeyed in order to make your time profitable. I would recommend every single person in this room to buy the book “How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth” by Douglas Stuart and Gordon Fee. This is an excellent book (though imperfect) that will help you approach God’s word in a helpful, accurate, and meaningful way. I sincerely want every person within the reach of my voice to get this book. Many Christians have a frustrated approach to the word of God simply because they are not interpreting and applying it correctly.

### ***Reason #6: Childish Cognition:***

#### *Diagnosing the Problem:*

One of the things that many Christians say to avoid the difficult work of investing into God’s word is this, “Jimmy, you want me to dig into the deep theology of God’s word? But hey, I thought God wanted us to keep things simple—I thought he wanted us to have child-like faith.” Most people think that the way we are to keep things simple is by avoiding complex doctrines, the intricate theology of the faith; however this is not how we keep it simple. In other words, they believe that Jesus’ plan for them is to remain child-like in their thinking—this is why I named this *Childish Cognition* (cognition has to do with the act or process of knowing). They get their reasoning from Jesus’ words regarding child-like faith in Luke 18:17,

*“I assure you: Whoever does not welcome the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”*

Most people think that child-like faith has to do with having an unformed, elementary understanding of the deep theology of God’s word. However, this is not what Jesus was referring to when he talked about child-like faith. Child-like faith refers to simple belief—believing what God has to say in the same way that a child believes his father’s far fetched fishing tales—no questioning, no skeptical analyzing of the details, just trusting. Look at the passage, child-like faith has everything to do with *welcoming* or *receiving* the kingdom, it has nothing to do with the depth or lack thereof of a person’s knowledge about God. Notice that Jesus speaks of child-like faith as opposed to child-like knowledge. As my brother has said before, there is a great deal of difference between *child-like* faith (simple trust) and *childish faith* (ignorant faith). After all, Paul warns the believers in Corinth,

*“Brothers, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults” (1 Corinthians 14:20).*

On a further note, we must ultimately ask the question, “How is true simplicity gained?” Most people think that simplicity is gained through avoiding deep doctrines like

the plague. However, I would suggest that avoiding the deep doctrines of the faith is not how one keeps things simple. In fact, *as ironic as it may sound*, I would argue that simplicity is gained the deeper one dives into the complex doctrines of the faith. Let me illustrate. I am about as far from a gear head as one can possibly get. I don't know anything about cars. When I open up the hood of a car and look at an engine, do you know what I see? A big, cluttered mass of confusion! However, if I were to express my confusion about cars to a good mechanic (as I have in the past), he will respond, "Actually, Jimmy, it is quite simple. Sure, it may look a bit confusing, but once you start working on cars you will find that there is nothing complex about it." The question is, how do these people get to a place where they see the simplicity of automobiles; what is it that brings them from a state of confusion and complexity to simplicity? Well... they spend time with cars, taking them apart and putting them back together, over and over and over. They busy themselves with the "nuts and bolts," the intricacies of the car. And... sooner or later, because they have familiarized themselves with the ins and outs of the car, they begin to make connections. "This gets engaged like this when you turn that. When you lift this, that spins, which then rotates these things. This squirts this into that which pressurizes this so that might release this in order to make that rotate" As they dig into the complexities, they begin to see how everything fits together. Although the mechanic realizes that fact that cars have numerous individual parts, each individual part makes a unique contribution to the whole. Although there is an emphasis on the details, the eye is on the big picture. Thus, when a mechanic lifts up the hood he doesn't see random wires floating around an engine block, rather he sees wires which have a specific function to play in the bigger picture.

There really is no such thing as "keeping things simple." Rather, if you want simplicity, you have to work for it. The task for you and I is to "make things simple." How do you make things simple? By diving head long into the complexities of the Word! By investing into the word of God regardless of what it may cost and how profitless it may seem at the time. If you bypass the complexities for the sake of simplicity, you may not have to think much (and thus you may be considered a simpleton), but you will have nothing but a pseudo-simplicity. After all, it is through analyzing and meditating on the complexities of the faith that you find the overarching connections. It is through analyzing the complexities that you find the organic whole, the big picture which dumps meaning into all the individual parts. Those who boast of attaining a simple faith by ignoring the intricate details of God's word have no ability to find significance or coherence, because their beliefs are free floating with no overarching connections to give their individual beliefs and doctrines stability or significance. The further you dig the more simple things become. You must remember that your investment into the deep things of God's word results in greater simplicity.

### ***Reason #7: Paper Popes:***

#### *Diagnosing the Problem:*

Because growing in the knowledge of God's word can be an irritating investment, often times there is tendency to replace the word of God with other religious, spiritual, or theological literature which requires less work and yet pays immediate dividends. What is the significance behind the phrase *Paper Popes*? The Pope is the Bishop of Rome, the

head of the Roman Catholic Church. The Roman Catholic Church teaches a doctrine called *Papal Infallibility*. *Papal* has to do with anything which pertains to the Pope. *Infallibility* refers to something that is without error. Thus the RCC teaches that the words of the Pope are to be put on par with the words of God in Scripture when he speaks about anything having to do with Divine revelation. Thus, Roman Catholics are supposed to consider his words to be infallible, above scrutinizing or testing. When the Pope speaks, his words are on par with the words of Christ. Thus, we see that the Catholic Church elevates the words of the Pope to be on par with the word of God, and consequently the Catholics put just as much stock, if not more, into the words of Pope as they do the word of God. We, as good Protestants, have rejected the Roman Catholic doctrine of *Papal Infallibility*. In fact, we do not even have a pope. We believe that the word of God is our sole authority. Any and every man, not excluding the Pope, must be tested by the perfect standard of God's word. However, although many Christians would affirm the Bible to be their only authority, many have an unduly dependence upon extra biblical works, whether they be spiritual or theological in nature, a dependence much akin to the dependence that Catholics have on the Pope. They are called *Paper Popes* because our popes are generally either individual books or authors of books.

Is this not true? How many of you read the *Our Daily Bread* or the *My Utmost for His Highest* devotionals? I cannot tell you how many Christians I know who have completely replaced their time in God's word for these (and other) devotionals. Other people prefer C.H. Spurgeon's *Morning and Evening*, or D.A. Carson's *For the Love of God*. I want to make it very clear that I am in no way slamming devotionals or theological books; however there is a real problem when the word of God is replaced by these extra biblical books. One time I had a friend who actually took a few month break from his devotions for the sake of reading the *Left Behind* series. There is a tendency to treat these extra biblical books like Catholics treat their Pope—to just mindlessly accept their words as gold.

Even some of those who consider themselves to be theological thinkers have a tendency to fall into this trap to. I have met so many theologically-minded Christians who approach everything written by Piper, Carson, Sproul, Packer, Spurgeon, MacArthur, Grudem and other Christian theologians the same way that the Catholics approach the Pope. My teacher, Dr. Devine, always used to make fun of this tendency. He would always say, "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled Packers." I have literally seen other believers, generally college students, use these theologians as the standard of all truth. "How can you believe that? Piper, Sproul, and MacArthur would all disagree?" My response, "Who cares, they are not the ultimate standard. If what they say can't line up with what God says in his word they are wrong." This is not to say that we should not give any weight whatsoever to these men, it is just to say that they are not infallible men, they are susceptible to being wrong.

Look at the following two passages. Both of these passages reveal qualities that are unique to the word of God and the word of God alone (check out the emphasis on the words in bold).

***All Scripture is inspired** by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness,<sup>17</sup> so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)*

*For the word of God is living and effective and sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating as far as to divide soul, spirit, joints, and marrow; **it is a judge of the ideas and thoughts of the heart.** (Hebrews 4:12)*

The words of mere men cannot replace the value of the word of God. The words of Piper, MacArthur, Chambers etc. can only have a life-giving, mind-enlightening, and soul-changing effect in so far as what they say is built upon the word of God.

*Prescribing a Solution:*

Do you have your own Paper Pope, some extra biblical writer or book that has replaced the role of the word of God in your life? If so, how can we fix this problem? Consider these four things:

1. Understand their value: You must first understand that there is nothing wrong with reading extra biblical literature. God has gifted certain men and women with the gift of communicating through writing. Not only would I urge to find the value of good Christian literature, but I would actually urge each and every believer within the reach of my voice to read good Christian books on theology or spirituality. The only problem I have with these extra biblical sources is when they are adhered to and pursued with a greater tenacity than the word of God.

2. Understand their purpose: You must ask yourself the question, “Why do I want to read Piper’s new book so badly; Why do I thrive on reading Oswald Chamber’s devotional every morning?” If seeking to get something from these works that the Bible cannot give you, you, my friend, have a Paper Pope. I will give you my own criteria. Extra biblical books are only profitable in so far as they do one or more of the following three things: they either must (1) help me to interpret or apply the word of God with greater accuracy; (2) give me fresh ways of communicating or thinking of truth which can readily be found in the Scriptures; (3) provide me cultural commentary that will be helpful for me to be understand the times in which we live so that I might be able to better engage and serve the culture. Ultimately, an extra biblical book is only go in so far as it aids me in learning, applying, and living the Scriptures to a greater degree. Thus, if your fascination with Piper, Sproul, or *My Utmost for His Highest* is not pointing you back to the Scriptures to have a relationship with God through a knowledge of his word, you are abusing their writings.

3. Understand the nature of the authors: No theologian, as sound as they may be, is perfect on this side of glory. Piper, Sproul, Chambers, and Spurgeon are fallible men. These men simply cannot reduplicate what can only be found in the word of God. These men will fail, they will be wrong, and the only way you will be able to discern the difference is when you test them to the word of God.

4. Understand their inferior nature: The true sign of an immature believer is when they find greater pleasure in reading extra biblical literature than they do in reading the Scriptures themselves. I have not always had a superior love for Scripture. There was a time while I was in college where I replaced the word of God in my devotionals with Wayne Grudem’s *Systematic Theology*. However, I have since grown to gain a superior love the word of God. If Piper, Grudem, or Carson were to stand before me I could honestly look them in the eye and say, “Piper, Grudem, Carson, I love your work. The

Lord has used your writing and preaching ministry in my life in ways that you will never know. However, I must also say that the greatest contribution that your writings have made in my life is to give me a greater love for the Scriptures. To be honest, while I love your writings, they are bland compared to the superior nature of the word of God.” I believe that if I were to say this to any of these theologians, their eyes would well up with tears and they would say, “what a breath of fresh air.” If you have not found a superior love for the word of God, if you are still clinging to the word of man, you have much room to grow. The only way that you will ever find a superior satisfaction in the word of God is if you keep it as the main portion of your diet.