

UNEDITED DRAFT

It is the season of Christmas cards and letters. They have started rolling in! It's always fun to read the letters and catch up on what's happening in the lives of family and friends. It's also fun to look at the beautiful cards. The design of Christian Christmas cards is fairly standard, isn't it? You'll almost always see a picture of the nativity in some form or another. "Peace on earth" is usually on it somewhere, or maybe "Joy to the World."

Today we're going to look at a text from the book of Malachi. He was the last prophet before Jesus came, and he has some clear prophecies about the birth of Jesus. Since it was Malachi's purpose to prepare people for the coming Savior, he would have been a good one to design and send Christmas cards. If he had, what would it look like? His card would probably have had a picture of a man walking toward you carrying a bottle of cleanser in one hand and a scrub brush in the other. And underneath would have been a quote: Malachi 3:3: "He will be like a launderer's soap."

Friends, Jesus is coming. He's coming to purify. He's coming to cleanse. So if you leave today with an image of Jesus carrying cleanser and a scrub brush, I will consider this a successful sermon.

Lets' consider the text today, and we'll see why it's vitally important that we understand Jesus in this way to prepare for his coming. First, a quick word about Malachi. He wrote his prophecy probably about 400BC. He was the last prophet before Christ. Malachi literally means, "My Messenger." This was likely not his name. The author actually remains a mystery since he never reveals his identity. In his very short book, he explains the love of God and calls for the people's repentance. That sound a lot like what we're doing here in the season of Advent, doesn't it? Explain the love of God and call people to repentance.

When Malachi was a prophet, it was about 100 years after God's people returned from exile in Babylon. A faithful remnant returned to Promised Land, and it was through them that God would usher in the era of the Messiah. Things started out well. When they returned to Israel, they rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem, the city and most importantly, the temple. Unfortunately, the enthusiasm didn't last, as they soon considered it more important to build for themselves earthly wealth. They also began to intermarry with the godless people of the nations all around them. They broke the Sabbath. They didn't respect God's gift of marriage. They cheated, lied and embezzled funds. And sadly, all of this godlessness applied to the priest as much as to everyone else. There was a lot of dirt in their lives that needed to be cleaned. There were a lot of impurities that needed to be burned out. You would think that God would just lose patience with these people and say, "Enough!"

But friends, isn't this just as much our story? Are we really so different today? What dirt do you have in your life? Sometimes the dirt is outward and evident. Everyone can see it. Sometimes we're ashamed of it. Sometimes we're proud of it. Sometimes the dirt is hidden. Do you have a secret sin you've tried to sweep under the rug and hide from everyone? Like the Israelites, do you become consumed with your building up your own house, instead of God's house? God is angry at our sin. He was angry at Israel's sin.

So what was Malachi's message? Was it one of judgment and punishment? That was deserved. It would be fair and understandable. Instead, God makes a promise which we'll read now from Malachi 3:1-4:

“See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. [We'll pause there and note something: although “my messenger” is the meaning of the word “Malachi”, clearly he not speaking about himself. In Mark's Gospel this verse is quoted. It is a prophecy of the coming of John the Baptist. He is the messenger who would prepare the way for the Lord.]

Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the Lord Almighty. 2 But who can endure Who can stand when he appears? the day of his coming?

This messenger of the covenant is Jesus. And at first glance it sounds like he is coming in judgment. Who can endure is coming? Can you? Can I? We who are impure? We who have dirt both visible and hidden? Who can endure the day of his coming?

For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. 3 He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver.

When this messenger of the covenant comes, he does not come first to judge, but first, to purify and cleanse. And this is where Malachi says he comes like a launderer's soap. Jesus comes with bleach and he's going to get the dirt out! Because when you are dirty, you are useless to God.

Some things are like that, aren't they? They are useless dirty, and they must be cleaned to be useful. Yesterday, Barb Baumann got out a vacuum cleaner to vacuum the back of church where the classroom was set up. The vacuum wasn't picking up much, so she pulled out the filter to check it. She came over and showed it to several of us who were standing there. It didn't even look like a filter. It was so full of dirt and dust and lint and gunk that it was unidentifiable and useless.

When you and I are filled with sin, we are useless to God. The ugly, disgusting, rebellious, perverse thought, words and actions cling to us, and transform us into something hideous to look at and useless to God. We must be cleaned!

The other comparison is to a refiner's fire. When ore is mined, it comes out of the ground with many impurities mixed in. The process for purifying hasn't changed in thousands of years... it's just been upgraded by technology. You heat raw ore, and the metal liquifies and goes to the bottom. The dirt and impurities stay on top where they can be easily removed. The more times that process is repeated the more pure the metal becomes. Unrefined, impure metals are worthless. All of the qualities that make them useful when they are pure are lost when they are impure.

So also with us. Sin is mixed into us. We are impure. This makes us useless. All of the qualities that God would be delighted to see in us, all of the works he would be delighted to see us do... sin spoils it all and is mixed into it all making it all worthless.

So God had two choices: throw us out, or clean us up. If he had chosen to throw us out, we couldn't have objected. But God in his love chose to clean us up. He did so by sending the messenger of his covenant, Jesus Christ. We are cleansed by him, not with sponge and soap, but by his shed blood. His innocent, pure, clean, holy life was sacrificed on the cross for our dirty and filthy. By his blood, we are made clean.

God can throw us out, he can purify us. He purifies us through his Son. Jesus took the impurities from us. The stuff that makes us unsuitable and useless, Jesus took upon himself. On

the cross, he endured the fire of God's wrath. All of our impurities were burned up. Trust in Jesus and you are made pure! God sees you as holy, blameless, pure and fully fit for heaven.

But also understand this: even while God has declared you pure and clean in his sight, in his love for you he continues purify your faith. He wants your trust in Jesus to be complete. To do that, you still will feel the heat in this world. Troubles will continue to plague you. Suffering will come into your life. God allows this all in love, because only through intense heat will we give up the sins we love so much, the selfishness that is deep in our heart. Only when the heat is turned up will we uncover what we have swept under the rug and give it to Jesus to be forgiven.

God does this so your faith will become stronger and your life of service to him more earnest and intentional. 2 Cor. says it this way: "And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again" (2 Cor. 5:15).

Or as Malachi says it in our text: "**Then the Lord will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, 4 and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the Lord, as in days gone by, as in former years.**"

The priests of Malachi's day were bringing diseased animals and inferior offerings to the Lord. Purified and cleansed, though, they will bring offerings in righteousness. With changed hearts and new motives and with joy at being purified and cleansed, they will bring God their first and best. Friends, do the same! You know the dirt God has cleaned out of you. You know the impurities Jesus has needed to burn of you. In thankful response, serve God with all your heart. Give God your very best. Give him the best of the time he has entrusted to you. Give him the best of the abilities he has give you. Give him the best of the wealth he has entrusted you. Make your life and every aspect of it a living sacrifice that gives glory to God!

This Christmas season I'd like you to do something. You're going to get a bunch more cards this year. Every time you open one and see the picture on the front, would you let your mind drift back to the message you heard today. Picture on the front of each card you get this year Jesus holding bleach and scrub brush. This is the real reason he was born in Bethlehem. He came to get the dirt out. He came to purify our hearts and minds and make for himself a people that are holy and dedicated to him. He so that you would now dedicate your life to him by giving him glory in all that you do as serve others in love. The Lord our launderer has come... and he is coming. Amen.