

# Cleaning Up for Christmas

Malachi 2:17-3:5

Preached December 6, 2009 by Dr. Dwight Kilbourne

You have wearied the Lord with your words. Yet you say, "How have we wearied him?" By saying, "All who do evil are good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them." Or by asking, "Where is the God of justice?" See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years. Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts.

**Where is the God of Justice.** Malachi records a question that has been on the lips of many throughout human history: "*Where is the God of justice?*"

Where was the God of justice when the American government forced 10,000's of Native Americans from their lands to relocate which cost the lives of some 4,000 Cherokees? Where was the God of justice during Stalin's reign of terror that resulted in the death of 20,000,000? Where was the God of justice when a young mother sold her five year old daughter as a sex slave and later the child was found murdered? Where is the God of justice when our team plays the better game and a questionable call gives the other team the advantage and they win? Where is the God of justice while we are eating a nice lunch in a few moments as a child in

Sudan dies of malnutrition?

People of all ages have asked this question: *Where is the God of justice?* You see most of us live with the notion that God is the One who rights the wrongs. We want to believe that God can intervene and stop the great injustices of our world and in our lives.

Why were the people of Malachi's day asking this question? It had been nearly two centuries since the Jews had any sense of self-rule. When Babylon destroyed Jerusalem and took most of the people captive, the captured lost hope. In the next 100 years or so glimmers of hope emerged when some were allowed to return to rebuild the temple and later the walls of the city. But by the time Malachi writes, the nation was occupied by Persia. They had no autonomy, no power, no authority and little hope. They wondered: *Where is the God of justice?*

Have you ever asked that question? Have you wondered where God was during those difficult times in your life? Have you asked about how God could allow terrible things that have happened in our world? Have you longed for the Lord to make right those things are unfair?

**Justice is coming!** Malachi is willing to take on this question and answers it with an eschatological tone – speaking about the end of time. He says One is coming to clean up people and set them straight.

When I was a child there were times when I misbehaved. (I know that is difficult for you to imagine. But it is true.) On some occasions, my mother would say to me, "Just wait until your Father gets home." At an early age, I knew Mom was expecting Dad to discipline me for my actions and give me what I deserved. Malachi was saying, "Wait until your Father gets home, he will take care of things."

Today is the second Sunday of Advent. The four week season prior to Christmas is when we focus attention of Jesus' coming. We talk about his coming from two perspectives: his coming as a

baby in Bethlehem and his second coming as the king of all kings and the Lord of all lords. Jesus promised his disciples that he would come back again following his resurrection. We live in the time between those two advents of Jesus.

One of the oldest creeds of the Christianity, the Apostle's Creed, speaks succinctly to these advents – listen to the words and say them in your heart – "and in Jesus Christ his only son, who was *conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary* (here is the first advent) suffered under Pontius Pilate, crucified, dead and buried and the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven (his departure). From *thence he shall come to judge* the living and the dead (the second advent). This creed echoes Malachi who spoke of God's coming to bring justice.

There are few subjects in Christian circles that stimulate more debate and discussion than the second coming of Jesus. Some argue that all the language of Christ's second coming is figurative. They do not expect a literal return of Christ. On the other extreme are those who step out on limbs and claim he is coming at a particular time and place.

Personally, I have more questions than I have answers on this subject. Yet I do believe that at the culmination of human history Christ will return and consummate his kingdom. In that kingdom, justice will be made complete.

**Cleaning up.** As Malachi writes about the coming of the God of justice, he uses two wonderful images that we can understand: He says the one who is coming will be like fire and soap.

Using wonderful eschatological imagery, Malachi tells us that the God of justice will come as fire. Often when we think of the image of fire being used to describe judgment, we think of destroying something or someone or of suffering punishment – "You will burn in the fires of hell."

But here fire is not a metaphor for destroying or punishing. Rather it is for

purifying. Gold production is nearly as old as human history and dates back to 6000 BC. In ancient human history, gold was initially found where it had been leached from veins. Eventually people discovered those veins could be mined. Early on those working with the precious metal discovered that the value of gold related to its purity. While there has been an evolution of technology and chemistry to remove impurities from gold ore, the use of fire or heat has been central. As one heats gold to certain temperatures, certain impurities are released and can be removed. When the impurities are removed, the purity of the gold is higher. The God of justice will come with fire to purify the lives of people.

The second image that Malachi uses is that of fuller's soap. The soap is essentially what we would think of as lye soap (without lard of hogs of course) made from wood ashes and oil. A fuller would use the soap wash in the process of preparing woolen and linen fabrics for use. The soap cleaned up the cloth and prepared it for stretching and thickening.

When I was in elementary school, I was buddies with a family of 5 boys who lived on a small farm. I remember one occasion when I had been invited to their home. The four of us boys who were closest in age got into a mud fight along a shallow branch in their pasture. When we returned to the house, we were so covered in black mud that the only white you could see on us was the white of our eyes and our teeth. When their mother saw us, she took immediate action. She did not let us go near the house. She got a big wash tub, made us stand in it and strip naked, pulled out the water hose, and sprayed us down. She gave us a bar of soap. She was determined to clean us up before we went into her house. She did not punish us but she made sure we were clean.

Think of these images: God comes as refining fire to purify and fuller's soap to clean up to make the cloth useable. He is not coming to destroy but to purify and clean up his people.

**The target of God's action** Often when Christians think of God coming to judge, they think that he is coming to judge the evil people of this world. He is going to

punish the wicked: murderers, thieves, liars, adulterers, etc. What is fascinating in this passage is that Malachi speaks not of God judging the wicked, but God judging his own people.

The act of purifying begins with those who are descendants of Levi. Let's test our biblical memory: Who were the descendants of Levi? Levi was one of the sons of Joseph and his descendants became the Jewish tribe of Levi. The Levites were set aside in the service of leading the people in acts of worship and caring for all the things related to worship. They were the clergy and staff of their day.

Malachi said God was coming to purify the clergy. This was the starting point. If you read what precedes this in the book of Malachi, it should come as no surprise that the clergy needs help. As a group, they had not been giving God their best. They had been presenting offerings of lame and ill animals. God was calling them to give their best.

In many ways this idea of the clergy being purified first is somewhat uncomfortable to me because I am one. Yet, I fully believe it is critical for religious leadership to lead the way spiritually. Religious leaders are held to higher standards. When we fail, it does damage to many. We find warnings in the NT: *For the time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God; if it begins with us, what will be the end for those who do not obey the gospel of God? (1 Peter 4:17) Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. (James 3:1)*

God's purpose though is not to punish the religious leaders but to bring them to a place where they are of greater value to the kingdom. God's action helps to make their service pleasing to God and effective.

God's act of purifying extends beyond the clergy. Listen again to God's voice speaking through the prophet: *"Then I will draw near to you for judgment."* Here God is speaking directly to the people who are his. They (and we) will face God's action. God promises to speak to a wide array of offenses – *sorcery* (spiritual dabbling with the demonic); *adultery* (violation of marital relation and

sexual impurity); *swearing falsely* (violating one's oaths and contracts willingly); *oppressing workers, widows, orphans and aliens* (matters of social justice). As you can hear, these are a wide range of offenses. God bears witness against these to straighten up how people live and relate to one another.

If we think seriously about what the words of the prophet are saying, we will find it difficult to escape that we are being addressed. God will bring justice by purifying those who are religious leaders as well as those who are part of the faith community.

**In the Sweet By and By?** As I reflect on the message of this text about God's action of purifying, I wonder if all of this has to do with something out there in the future – in the sweet by and by. If so, do we merely keep on as we always have and just wait for God to do God's thing? Do we commit ourselves to a type of religious fatalism?

Personally I am not content to think and live that way. I do not believe that is the message conveyed by Malachi. Malachi was writing in such a way as to engage the people in examining their own lives.

The prophet spoke of a messenger preparing the way for God. The Gospel writers interpreted this as John the Baptist. He prepared the way for Jesus. I would ask, "Are we called to prepare the way for God's action?" We too are messengers to prepare the way.

Think about the advent of Jesus. When Jesus came the first time, he ushered in a new reality we call the Kingdom of God. When people encounter Christ and that kingdom, they begin to experience God's purifying action in their lives. There is a sense of conviction and desire to be different. When the second coming takes place, God's justifying acts will be completed.

One day, Jesus was passing through Jericho. A tax-collector who had made a great living by collecting Rome's tax as well as his abundance share was very interested in seeing Jesus. When Jesus passed by, he saw this tax collector. He called to the tax collector and said that he wanted to go to his home for dinner. As the two were walking toward the

man's home, the tax collector said, *"Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much"* (Luke 19:8). This man was transformed by the purifying fire and cleansing power of being in Jesus' presence.

**Invitation.** Sometime in the future, the God of Justice will be present in his fullness to make all things right and to complete the purifying of his people. The good news is we do not have to wait to experience his work. Christ has come and is present among us and present at this table.

I invite you to open up your heart, mind and life to the purifying work of Christ. Let's consider these in a time of reflection and confession:

- What attitudes, emotions or thought patterns keep you from knowing and serving Jesus fully?
- What behaviors, habits and practices in your private life, your home life and in your professional life do you sense are not pleasing to God and contrary to what God desires?
- What is lacking in your life and practice of faith?
- What interests and desires do you have that you know are leading away from God's interests and desires?
- What is present in your relationships with others that is a barrier to you knowing God fully and being a servant of love to them?