

## Live as One Purified, Refining Your Actions

### Malachi 3:1-4 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup> "I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. 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. <sup>2</sup> But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. <sup>3</sup> He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, <sup>4</sup> and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years.

Last week, we developed a Second Advent checklist, a list to prepare for Jesus' second coming. It was a checklist accomplished by prayer - praying that God would clear the way and provide what is lacking to our faith, praying that God would increase and make our love for each other and everyone else overflow, praying that God would strengthen our hearts in the holiness of Christ that clothes us so that we know that we will be blameless on the day our Lord Jesus returns. Our preparations to welcome Jesus again continue today with our Bible reading from Malachi.

Malachi is the last book of the Old Testament written around 400 B.C. in a world nearly 150 years removed from the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple at the hands of the Babylonians and about 100 years since the Jews returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the temple and resumed offerings sacrifices there. The Jews were anxious to have God come, as he promised. But they wanted him to come mostly to judge the wicked people around them, the ones who made their lives and work hard. They wanted God to come and make the wicked people pay. They got so impatient waiting for God that they started to claim that God was happy with those who did evil, that he was pleased with them. It's the only reason they could think of as to why God would delay punishment on the wicked.

God's people were praying for him to come in judgment. Yet, Malachi has spent the first two chapters of his book calling the Jews to repentance, mainly the priests who came from the Israelite tribe of Levi. They had been bringing diseased, blind, lame animals to be sacrificed before God. Yet God had commanded that only the blemish-free, perfect, best animals be sacrifices to him. They were a picture of the perfect sacrifice needed to take away the sins of the people. Yet, they were giving God what they didn't want, the lowest grade sacrifices, thinking that this should appease God. The priests dishonored God with their contemptible offerings while they kept the best to themselves.

The sins of God's people in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. are not foreign to us. Have we ever offered up to God subpar offerings? Have we given him our best or the leftovers, the things we don't really want to keep? To be clear, God is not looking at the number dollar signs attached to your offerings, but he is looking at your heart. He wants our giving to be motivated by what he has given us. He spared no expense with us. He gave us his all. Jesus gave us his whole life – a life lived under the law to complete the law for us and a death died for us in our place to pay for our debt of sins against God. By this, he has given us an eternal, never ending life of joy in heaven. How have we responded to God as he spared no expense for us? Do we give generously with thanksgiving or half-heartedly, reluctantly, out of obligation?

Like the priests of Malachi's day, our sins are exposed and the Lord is coming. We know he is coming because God has sent his messenger before him, the one who prepares the way for the Lord. This is, of course, John the Baptist. After him, "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. (verse 1) This will happen quickly. If the Lord comes now, will we be able to endure the day of his coming? Will we be able to stand when he appears? "For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap." (verse 2)

What does that mean that the Lord's coming is like a refiner's fire? If you've never watched someone refine a precious metal like silver or gold, google it after church today. Watch a video on Youtube. They heat up a crucible to nearly 2000 degrees Fahrenheit (or 1000 degrees Celsius). The metal is glows hot orange and yellow with this heat. The gold or silver is added to the crucible and it melts. The impurities rise to the top and are skimmed off, leaving behind a purified precious metal.

A refining fire process is neat, but picture yourself as the precious metal. Think of the intense heat, one that melts you. It's painful, but it doesn't destroy you; it reshapes you. It purges from you the bad stuff, the impurities, so that at the end of the process you are better.

The same is true for the launderer's soap. We tend to throw clothes in the washing machine, add the soap, turn it on, and walk away. But when the machine gets to working, it agitates the clothes to make the soap pass through them and remove the dirt, cleaning them. That's all fine and good for clothes, but what if you are the clothes and God is the launderer? The launderer has to agitate you with his soap to clean you, pushing you around, drenching you in water. Some people when washing their clothes in a river beat them against the rocks to get the soap worked through. When you think of this as a picture of something you go through when Jesus comes, you might think that God is advocating wash boarding for you. God purifying his people when he comes is painful and intense.

In the Old Testament, the prophets looked ahead to the Lord's coming often without distinguishing between his first advent and second advent. When they spoke of Christ's coming, they pointed to both his coming to bear the sins of the world and to judge the world. We praise God that he has come the first time, as the babe in the manger, to bear our sins, to be our perfection. Because he spared no expense on us by living that perfect life and sacrificing himself on the cross, our sins are paid for. He has clothed us with his perfection. Before God, we are holy and blameless because of what Jesus did for us in his first advent.

Now having been purified, we await Jesus' second advent. We are praying as Paul encouraged us to do - praying that God would clear the way and provide what is lacking to our faith, praying that God would increase and make our love for each other and everyone else overflow, praying that God would strengthen our hearts in the holiness of Christ that clothes us so that we know that we will be blameless on the day our Lord Jesus returns. While we pray, God is working to refine us, to rid us of our impurities, to reshape us not as a sinner but as his purified child.

Because God is working to refine us, he brings situations into our lives as opportunities to live as what he has made us to be: his holy ones purified by his life and his blood. He gives us opportunities to deny sin and instead live for him. These situations don't only come when we are well rested and in a good frame of mind. They come when we are stressed, when we are burdened, when we want to be left alone.

What does this look like? Stealing from what comes next in Luke chapter 3, John gave people some specific direction in what God's refining process would look like in their lives. He preached fruit of repentance that looks like this: "Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same." (Luke 3:11) To the tax collectors: "Don't collect any more than you are required to." (Luke 3:13) To some soldiers: "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay." (Luke 3:14) Give when you are able, not just when it's convenient. Don't be greedy with what you can get. Be content with what you have.

God refining us often involves self-denial. Maybe you are out and about running an errand, but then an opportunity presents itself for you to serve someone else and you are actually able to do it. You push aside your desire to get your task accomplished to help this person as you are best able to help them. Maybe this is a denial of self to click on that website that you know will only lead you to sin, to pass on that drink to avoid the downward spiral and regret of what comes next, to avoid any hint of flirting with that person who is not your spouse or significant other, to deny yourself from holding a grudge by withholding forgiveness to the person who has wronged you. Maybe God is giving you refinement through examining your offerings at church – what you give to God in way of time, talents, and treasures. Am I behaving like the priests in Malachi's day and giving to God what I don't want, the leftovers? Am I giving to God subpar offerings? Am I giving to him reluctantly because I want to keep the best for myself? Am I responding generously to the God who spared no expense on me to save me, purify me, and refine me?

All of these moments are moment where God is working to refine us, to shape us more and more to live for him as one of his holy ones. He gives us these moments not because they are easy but because they are hard. They work out of us our sinful desires as we deny sin and instead choose God. This is what he did for the priests in Malachi's day. He purified them and refined them. We heard the intended result: "Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years." (verses 3b-4)

By the Lord's first advent, we are purified by his works, his life, his perfection, his sacrifice. As ones who are purified, the Lord continues to work on us to refine us, to continue to strengthen us in right living for him. He spares no expense in doing this. We respond by asking God to supply what we lack in those moments of being refined. Purify us again and again when we sin, Lord. Refine us continually by bringing us those opportunities. Make us people who bring offerings to you in righteousness, acceptable to you because you have purified us. Amen.