

Love - Pure Love
Malachi 2:17 - 3:5, Luke 3:1-6

Brothers and sisters, are you ready for Christmas? It is December 9th and that means there are only 16 days left to prepare and get everything ready for your celebrations...

How many of you have put up your Christmas tree? What about your Christmas lights? And how much progress have you made on your Christmas shopping? Do you know what you are going to be getting everyone on your list this year? There's so much to get done isn't there!

And I would be lying if I didn't admit that all the stress of preparing for Christmas Present as an adult makes me nostalgic for the Christmas Past of my childhood, where the only preparation I needed to do was look through the Consumer's Distributing Catalogue to decide what I was wanted to get for Christmas.

It was far less stressful wasn't it - I don't know if anyone else feels that way... though this comic from Calvin and Hobbes

reminds us - even children feel a certain amount of stress in preparing for Christmas, especially when it come the requirement that they need to "be good" in order to receive the presents they want for Christmas.

Now there is an incredible amount of theological irony in telling children they need to "be good" in the weeks and days leading up to Christmas so they will get the gifts they want as part of celebrating Christ's birth – a birth necessitated by our own basic inability as human beings to BE good...

Calvin has some more insightful thoughts on this matter



So I wonder brothers and sisters – in all our adult preparations for Christmas, do we still give any thought as to whether or not we’ve been “good enough”?

Now I certainly hope that we have matured in the Christian faith and outgrown any moralism that we may have picked up as children, from being good in order to get our gifts, but there is a proper and biblical sense in which preparing for Christ’s birth ought to cause us to examine ourselves and ask, like Calvin does, in what sense we are being or acting good and is it enough?

Certainly as the season of Advent reminds us that Christ’s first coming helps us remain expectant for Christ’s second coming, and thus we can understand how the reality of the second coming might cause us to examine ourselves - since we expect to give an account of our lives and our faith as we stand before God at that time...

But the birth of Christ – little baby Jesus in the manger, on a silent night and holy night, with a star shining brightly in the

heavens... well, that just doesn’t seem to motivate us to take stock of where we stand before God in the same way does it?

Sure we want to remain focused on Jesus being “the reason for the season” in the midst of all the busyness and activity...

But preparing for the birth of Christ by sitting down and taking stock of our faults and failings and getting specific about naming and confessing sins in our life – well that seems incongruous doesn’t it, just like the scripture passages for this second Sunday of Advent with its them of Love.

We didn’t read anything about Love in those passages, but they were focused on repentance, purification, and justice, and I completely understand if you are wondering how these passages relate to Love and the Birth of Jesus Christ.

Now I will confess that I did not pick these passages – these are actually the traditional scriptures that the Church has used for many years on the 2nd Sunday in Advent – so what exactly is going on here?

Well stick with me and we will see how this all comes together to help us get prepared for the arrival of Christ.

So our first step is to ask the question – what is wrong in these texts, what is the trouble, what is going on that is not right?

Well let's start with the text from Malachi, and right away we can tell that the trouble is in the relationship between Yahweh and his people. The prophet Malachi is telling Israel that they have wearied Yahweh... they have exhausted and worn him out... with their words. Now what exactly does that mean?

Well it's kind of like Yahweh is feeling like we all do as parents when we have to listen to the constant bickering and fighting going on between our kids... and then we have to listen to them tattle on each other and complain and whine to us...

Yahweh is feeling like we all do when those bickering kids suddenly come to us all sweet and nice saying *"Dad have I told you how much I love you lately??"* right - what do you want?

And Yahweh is feeling like we all do when our kids complain that they have it so tough and act all put-upon when they have to do their chores, and they don't even do them well. Yet we have put up with all their nonsense and provided them with blessings of a good life.

And if we as parents call them on it... well the kids roll their eyes, get all huffy, and they have no idea what we're talking about and how they've offended us, right?

Israel does the same thing, when Yahweh confronts them about how they are making Him weary. They protest and feign their innocence! *"What?? How have we done this?!"*

But Yahweh has two very specific examples for them, Malachi points out that *"It's when you say 'All who do evil are good in the eyes of Yahweh, and he is pleased with them' or 'Where is the God of justice?'"* (vs. 17)

Now, what does this have to do with Love and Christmas?

Well when Yahweh began His Covenant relationship with Israel and gave them the Law of Moses, they were instructed to *“**Love** Yahweh your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength!”* (Deut 6:5) and they were also to *“**Love** their neighbor as themselves”* (Lev 19:18)

But when Israel is twisting and manipulating and spinning God’s Law in order to say that those who are breaking the Law and doing evil are in fact somehow doing good... and that when Yahweh sees what they are doing he is actually pleased!?! - this is **not** loving your neighbor as yourself.

And when their disobedience from twisting of God’s law results in Yahweh allowing them to reap the consequences of their covenant unfaithfulness and they have the gall to complain *“Where is the God of justice?!”* this is **not** Loving God with all their heart, soul and strength!

Now – it is also quite possible that Israel was scoffing as they said *“Where is this God of justice?”* meaning they believed they could act unjustly and take advantage of their fellow Jews

because there was no consequences. So this phrase can also be indicative of **not** loving their neighbor as themselves.

And in the same way, twisting and manipulating the words of God to say that what is evil is good, that is a grievous offence against Yahweh, and so that phrase can also be indicative of **not** loving God properly.

And when you reflect on the offenses that are listed at the end of the reading; sorcery, adultery, perjury, defrauding laborers, oppressing the widows and orphans and denying justice to foreigners – these all have a sense in which they violate both the command to love God AND the command to love your neighbor, they really are tied together..

It’s hard to break one and not break the other.

So, brothers and sisters, what this reveals to us is how God’s people were breaking both commands; they did **not** Love their God or their neighbor, and this meant that they were **not** prepared or ready to receive the promised Messiah.

Now how does this apply to us as God's people today? Well in terms of examining ourselves in preparation for Christmas – Let us consider if we are guilty of the same offences.

How have we not loved God and our neighbors and are thus **not** ready for the arrival of Christ?

Now when I first read the passage from Malachi, I thought – Wow! Is Malachi talking to Israel or is he talking to the North American church in 2018? Especially with this verse *“they say All who do evil are good in the eyes of Yahweh, and he is pleased with them!”* That is so applicable to us!

There are so many things that we don't call evil anymore, right? That is our first clue brothers and sisters. We need to examine ourselves and take note of what we are hesitant, reluctant, or even resistant to call out as evil these days.

Let's look at some of the offences listed in the passage – starting with sorcery. Is that evil? Well... maybe if it's messing around with black magic or the occult. Maybe voodoo or

Spiritism as well, but... some of those things are considered cultural heritage for certain groups of people so...

So, now our national church is reluctant to officially say that we must share the gospel of Jesus with Indigenous people in Canada because native spirituality is sufficient instead.

And while we may find this shocking and rather disturbing, the more important question is if we recognize how easily we can turn our own faith into sorcery, trying to manipulate Jesus and turn his name into blessings. Do we name it and claim it? Do we call the Prosperity Gospel good and God pleasing or are willing to recognize that for the evil that it is?

And what about adultery... what do we call that nowadays? Well... that term is sort of reserved for only the real scum-bag types who cheat on their spouses or misogynist harassers.

But biblically speaking adultery is any intimate sexually activity that takes place outside of the context of a legal marriage commitment between one man and one woman. Where does

that hit each of us and are we willing to call that for the evil it is in the eyes of God?

It's important to ask because many of God's people saying that sexual activity of all sorts and variations between consenting adults is good and pleasing to God - and there is a push in many historically orthodox churches to bless and approve of same-sex marriage and poly-amory!

These are instances where we can end up saying that what is evil is good and that Yahweh is pleased about it...

And the same goes for the instances when we do not speak up on behalf of the working poor when they are being taken advantage of but instead say *"at least they have jobs!"*

Or when we do not speak up with truth to counter the lies and misinformation and fear that can perpetrate abuse and racism and discrimination towards people who have immigrated (legally) into our Country... and even those who have come here illegally... deserve to be treated as fellow image-bearers

of God as we enforce the legal and correct process they ought to follow for immigration and refuge.

And at the risk of going on too long here brothers and sisters, but in the interests of fully listening to the scripture passage speaking to us today – when we say that *"God is Love"* but what we really mean is that *"Love is god"* and that there is no punishment for sin, no anger about our disobedience, no expectations of holiness, and certainly no place called Hell...

Then we too are guilty of wearing Yahweh out by saying *"Where is this God of 'Justice?'"*

And now brothers and sisters – having examined ourselves according to the scriptures with regards to how we fail at Loving God and our neighbor – we are more prepared for the arrival of Christ...

Because as I said earlier – the birth of Christ was necessitated by our inability to be good; our ability to Love God and our neighbor as faithful covenant partners with Yahweh.

We shouldn't look forward to the baby in the manger because Jesus is cute and cuddly, but because in that manger every part of human nature that is fallen and fails to love is reborn anew in divine perfection.

So you see – examining ourselves for all our faults and failures and sins really does prepare us to celebrate the birth of Jesus, and it also makes us ready to hear the good news from the scriptures.

Now the good news we find in this passage this morning is that Yahweh is going to send a messenger to prepare the way, and when that happens then the Lord himself will come.

And what is good about this News is that God will provide someone to help his people prepare the way. If left to their own devices they will not prepare – they will continue to not Love God and their neighbors and not be ready! So God will send them a messenger who will help them to *“Prepare the way for the Lord, and make straight paths for him.”* (Luke 3:4)

And when the messenger has prepared the way for the Lord, then Malachi says - the Lord will come!

And as our second scripture reading from Luke 3 indicates, this promise in Malachi was fulfilled at a very specific and identifiable time in history with the birth and subsequent ministry of John the Baptist, the son of Zechariah and the birth and ministry of Jesus came soon afterwards.

So the first part of the good news is that Yahweh doesn't leave it up to His people to get ready, He steps in and intervenes by sending John the Baptist – who preaches a baptism for the repentance of sins.

Now the second part of the good news is that when the Lord comes, *“he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver.”* (vs. 2-3)

So God's people won't just repent and turn away from sin – they will be cleansed from it and purified from it.

And the third part of the good news is that these cleansed and purified people will be able to offer acceptable worship to Yahweh once again...

Now please notice that the good news about purification and cleansing is literally the central part of our scripture passage, but - it is followed by the list of specific offenses against God and neighbor which Yahweh says he will prosecute.

This seems a bit puzzling doesn't it – why do we receive the good news and then we go back to what seems to be bad news again?

Well, brothers and sisters, I think that is best explained with how the good news in this passage applies to us today.

Friends – let us be thankful that God steps in and intervenes in our lives, that He does not wait for us to prepare the way for Him, but that He sends a messenger to help us get prepared.

And who might that messenger be for us?

Whoever the Lord uses to bring us the message from the scriptures that we have not Loved God and our neighbors as we ought to and that we need to turn from our sin and repent in order to prepare for the Lord's second coming.

And the messenger is whomever the Lord uses to point us towards and tell us about Jesus Christ – and how He will purify us and refine us... just as John the Baptist pointed the people of his day to the one who would come after him and told them that He will baptize them with the Holy Spirit and fire!

(Matt 3:11)

So brothers and sisters – what does it mean for us to be purified and refined? Well this is how the arrangement of this scripture passage going from good news to seemingly bad news is best explained.

So the good news is that Jesus Christ was born as the perfect human being who Loves God and loves his neighbor in perfect faithfulness to God's law...

In this sense we as humans have been purified and refined, because our nature is salvaged in Christ's new nature.

But that new nature needs to get transferred from Jesus - to us. So as the Holy Spirit transfers this new nature to us, it convicts and prosecutes any activity in which we do not Love in the perfect way - in the way that Jesus Loves God and neighbor as the fulfilment of God's Law. (Matt 5:17)

You see the new nature of Jesus Christ applied to our old nature by the Holy Spirit changes us, it transforms us, it won't allow expressions of sorcery, adultery, perjury, injustice and oppression - or anything else that is contrary to God's Law to stay in our lives.

They have to go... we must turn away from them! They are not expressions of Love towards God or to our neighbors.

Now people may protest and try to say "*maybe they can be expressions of love?*" But that's just going back to saying that what is evil is good and Jesus has changed all that for us.

And our sinful nature will resist and try to say "no... love is god" – but it's not, Yahweh is God and He defines Love, and His definition of Love is purification and refining.

He has shown us this in the purification and refining of human nature in the birth of Jesus at the first coming of Christ... and I can't think of a better way to describe how this purification and refining Love anticipates the second coming of Christ than what Paul writes in Ephesians 5:26-26

"Christ loved the church (that's us) and gave himself up for her, to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless."

What a beautiful description of Christ's love and how it purifies and refines us so that we will be made perfect like Him when He comes back for us.

Brothers and sisters Christmas is coming – Are you ready?