

MONDAY, 12/2

Read Malachi 2:17-3:1

¹⁷*You have wearied the LORD with your words. "How have we wearied him?" you ask.*

By saying, "All who do evil are good in the eyes of the LORD, and he is pleased with them" or "Where is the God of justice?"

"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.

The book of Malachi is framed as an argument between God and His people. Here we see the people challenge the Lord's justice. The Lord reminds them of their own words, which uncover the fact that they do not truly understand God's justice. The second half of verse 17 shows that they have it backward.

God responds by promising to send a messenger who will prepare the way for the Lord to come to His people. The Lord will draw near to His people where His justice will be revealed through judgment. The Lord's judgment will expose the righteous from the unrighteous. God's desire is seen in the purpose of the messenger, who is to bring the people back to the Lord.

It's important for us to remember two things from this passage. The first is that God's judgment is real. It is becoming increasingly common in the church for people to assume that God won't actually judge-- that in the end, everyone will be saved. This is not a Biblical idea. It is wishful thinking, and short-sided thinking at that. God's judgment is necessary for things to be restored. Everything that is evil, harmful to creation, and refuses to submit to His rule will be condemned so that a new heaven and earth can be established. Through judgment God will make what is wrong with the world right again. That's a good thing.

The second is that God desires to save. God doesn't want to condemn. He wants to redeem. Second Peter 3:9 tells us that God isn't in a hurry to judge the world, not because He is slow to keep His promise, but because He doesn't want anyone to perish. He wants "everyone to come to repentance." This is God's heart toward His creation. We must be able to hold to both of these truths.

I wonder why it can be hard to hold together God's judgment and His desire to save.
I wonder why both God's judgment and His salvation are so important.

Sending prayer:

"God of glory, I know and trust that You are good. You despise that which harms and destroys Your creation. You have come to make the wrong things right again. Thank You for having the desire to redeem that which is broken. You provided the way back to You at Your own terrible cost. Thank You for this amazing gift. Amen."

TUESDAY, 12/3

Read Malachi 3:2-5

²*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. ³He 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, ⁴and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years.*

⁵*"So I will come to put you on trial. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive the foreigners among you of justice, but do not fear me," says the LORD Almighty.*

One of the problems addressed in Malachi was that the priests no longer honored the Lord. The priests' hearts were not set toward the Lord, which is a problem considering that they served as messengers of God's message and ministry to the people. This is why God pledges here to cleanse the priesthood, as it was essential to bringing the people back to the Lord.

The image for the Lord at judgment is that He is like a refiner's fire and a launderer's soap. The idea here is that God will remove the impurities that keep people's hearts far from Him. This is a powerful image for us to consider for our own lives, as sin easily steers our hearts away from the Lord, even without our being aware of it. Often our sin flies under our radar or has become so common that it is easily justified. The fact of the matter is it is harmful to us and our life with the Lord. We need to be placed into the refiner's fire. We need the grace of God to wash us clean like the launderer's soap. When we do this, we will experience a new heart and desire for the Lord. We will seek to honor Him and bless Him in new ways.

I wonder what sins you need to confess to the Lord.

I wonder: Are you willing to ask the Lord to reveal the sins you aren't aware of so they can be brought before Him?

Sending prayer:

"Lord, we are always in need of Your healing grace. We are prone to sin. We can easily turn a blind eye to it in our lives. We justify it because we see others participating in the same things. We have no excuse. We need You to show us the impurities that lie within our hearts. We ask that You bring healing to our brokenness. We look to You and You alone for forgiveness. We ask that You restore us by washing us clean. Make us once again into a new creation in and through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

WEDNESDAY, 12/4

Read Luke 3:1-3

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Tracoenitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—²during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

The messenger that Malachi foreshadows is John the Baptist. Luke makes those connections quite clear as we will see in Luke 3.

One of the ways that John clears the path for the Lord's coming to us in Christ is that he preaches a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." John calls on the people to acknowledge their sin and need for God's cleansing grace. This is not one of the favorite subjects of listeners, but John's message spreads far and wide. People are drawn to him to be baptized and receive God's forgiveness. This is how John fulfills the prophecy of drawing people's hearts toward the Lord.

John preaches that we come to the Lord through repentance. Repentance means that we acknowledge our sins to God. We do this not because God isn't aware of our sin, but because we need to face it. I once heard a pastor say that it's important that we agree with God about our sin. When we're both on the same page, then we can know where and how we need healing.

When we repent in this way, we are looking to the Lord for life. This is an important step of faith. We are, in effect, saying to God, "You alone can save me. I need Your help. I need Your grace to cover me." We know that God is eager to redeem, but He wants us to have a heart eager to be redeemed. When we turn to Him in this way, we can have every confidence that He indeed does forgive us. First John 1:9 reads, "If we confess our

sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." So then, let us approach His throne of grace to find His healing mercy and grace.

I wonder: Why is it important for us to acknowledge our sin before God?

I wonder what confidence 1 John 1:9 gives you about God's forgiveness in your life.

Sending prayer:

"God of Glory, no sin of mine is hidden from You. You see them all, and yet You still love me. I cannot help but echo the psalmist's words, 'Who am I that You think of me?' You love me because You are so very good. While it is painful to acknowledge my sin to You, it is a privilege to turn to You for healing. You extend forgiveness to Your children. I can have complete confidence today that I have been made righteous through Jesus. Thank You. I love You so much. Amen."

THURSDAY, 12/5

Read Luke 3:4-6

⁴ *As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:*

*"A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
'Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.*

⁵ *Every valley shall be filled in,
every mountain and hill made low.*

*The crooked roads shall become straight,
the rough ways smooth.*

⁶ *And all people will see God's salvation.'"*

In these passages, Luke links John's ministry to another prophet, Isaiah. Isaiah, along with Malachi, envisioned a messenger that would precede God's restoring His people.

The image Isaiah gives for John's ministry is a foreman preparing the path for the coming of a king. There were times in the ancient world when roadways were improved to make the journey easier for a king.

While their aim was to make the trip more comfortable, the intent behind preparing the way for the Lord is that the hearts of the people would be opened so they would receive Him. God wants His people to be spiritually ready to meet Him when He comes. This is the purpose of John's ministry. John knows that soon Jesus will come. He will reveal God's Kingdom to the people. This--Jesus' earthly ministry-- is one of the most important events in the history of the world. God was coming to us! The people could not afford to miss the coming salvation that Jesus would make possible for them.

I wonder what you can do to clear the way for God to move in your life.

I wonder who you can begin praying for that their eyes and hearts would be open to Jesus.

Sending prayer:

"Jesus, how blessed we are that You would come near to us. We are grateful that You gave us a glimpse into Your Kingdom. How wonderful is the way in which You so graciously rule over Your people. You show grace and goodness by heaping salvation and peace upon us. Thank You for revealing Yourself to me. I want to begin praying for someone in my life who does not yet know You. Would You begin to open their eyes to You? Help them see You for all You are. Remove anything preventing them from seeing Your goodness and love, and may they come to know You in all Your glory. Amen."

FRIDAY, 12/6

Read Luke 3:7-9

⁷ John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?" ⁸ Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ⁹ The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

John the Baptist is surrounded by crowds of people who have come to be baptized. Each one of them was quick to assume that they deserved to be baptized because they were Israelites, God's chosen people. They completely underestimated their responsibility in repentance, a process of sharing their sins with God and asking for His forgiveness. John was livid! As he faced the crowd, the first thing out of his mouth was, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?" It was as if he were saying, "Who are you to assume you deserve such a gift without keeping your end of the bargain?"

He continues his tirade by telling them that their lineage was not enough to save them. They are no more or less likely to be forgiven than anyone else. The Israelites needed to be more aware of the sins they commit, no matter how insignificant they might seem. They needed to take that next step to repent in order to decrease the distance between them and God. John is clear: God is what nurtures spiritual growth from the roots up. The bigger the distance between us and God, the more likely we will be cut off from Him like an ax cutting a tree down at its roots.

How can we prevent separation from God? How can we ensure that "our roots" remain healthy?

Sending prayer:

"Lord, I want to grow closer to You. I want to know You so well that there is no way to tell where I end and You begin. I humbly give my life to You. Take all of my sins, one by one, and forgive me for all that I have done that offends You. Amen."

SATURDAY, 12/7

Read Luke 3:10-14

¹⁰ "What should we do then?" the crowd asked.

¹¹ John answered, "Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same."

¹² Even tax collectors came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?" ¹³ "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them.

¹⁴ Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?" He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay."

The crowd of presumptuous Israelites surrounding John the Baptist were convinced that they needed to do what they could to be baptized but weren't sure how to repent of their sins. He tells them that they must never leave a neighbor naked or hungry if they have something that could share with someone who has nothing. John then faces specific groups who ask him what they must do to be baptized. He responds with instructions to help them refrain from committing the sins they are most likely to commit. For example, John faced the tax collectors who wish to be baptized and told them to stop collecting more than what was required to take. He faces the soldiers who wished to be baptized and tells them to stop extorting money and accusing people falsely. He encourages them to be content with their pay.

Given the life we lead at this moment, what would it take for us to repent of our sins and either be baptized or honor our baptism?

Sending prayer:

"Lord, I know my life is steeped in sin, but I am often too blind to see what those sins are. Open my eyes so that I can see how I mistreat others. Open my ears to hear what others have said to me about the way I have hurt them. Open my mind to become more aware of what I do that can be described as a sin. With Your mercy and grace, show me the way to fully repent of the sins of which I may be unaware. Amen."

SUNDAY, 12/8

Read Luke 3:15-18

¹⁵The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. ¹⁶John answered them all, "I baptize you with^[w] water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with^[c] the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." ¹⁸And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.

Imagine being one of those crowd who both wait with expectation and concern. Who is this guy who claims to be able to forgive sins, something only God can do? Is he the Messiah, one that was prophesied by the prophets in the Old Testament? Regardless of what they have heard about John the Baptist, John was quick to clarify that he was not the Messiah, but the one who makes the way for Him to come to us. He addressed the entire crowd when he basically said, "I baptize by water only, but the Messiah, the one that comes after me, with baptize you in the name of the Holy Spirit."

The Messiah, for John, is the true judge of sins. Only the Messiah will be able to sort out the ones who are willing to consider their sins and repent, and those who are not. There are consequences to those who refuse to consider their actions honestly and humbly. Judgment is a sentence only the Messiah can render. Though admittedly only the messenger, John will continue telling them the good news of the gospels and to introduce the coming of the "real Messiah".

What is John trying to tell the crowd about the consequences of their actions? What risks are they taking by living without repentance? Why does John want the crowds to repent before Jesus came into the picture?

Sending prayer:

"Lord, how can I become so blind to the consequences of living a life without the repentance of my sins? Protect me from myself, from my sinful actions. Teach me to fold repentance into my daily life, so that I am more aware of my sins than ever before. Amen."