



This is the third Sunday of Advent. We celebrate Advent because we want to prepare our hearts for the celebration of Christmas. For many of us, preparing for Christmas means we go shopping, attend parties, entertain friends and family, and decorate our homes.

I live in San Carlos now and I'm amazed at the elaborate ways people decorate the outside of their homes. What ever happened to a simple string of multicolored lights across your roofline? Now we have massive Santas and snowmen being held up by air compressors. We have lighted, robotic deer that appear to be feeding on our front lawns! One house I walked by the other night had outdoor music piped in—Frank Sinatra singing Silver Bells! Talk about pressure!

But this is why if we're going to really do Christmas as the celebration of the coming of Jesus Christ, both His first coming and second coming; if we're going to really use this as a time to remind us of all that means to us, we need Advent.

Advent is like a siren. Sometimes you hear a siren late at night and you wonder where it is, what's happening. But it draws your attention, at least for a moment. Sometimes you hear a siren and it's very close, maybe even right behind you. It's a jolt! If you're in your car you stop. Advent is a siren that helps us at least slow down or even stop. It summons to draw our attention to Christ.

But how do we do that? What does that really look like? What will it mean for us to do that well? The book of Malachi can help us. Malachi came along in 430 B.C., about 100 after the Jews returned to Israel from their 70-year exile in Persia. They'd rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem under the prodding of the prophet Haggai. But as the decades passed, they'd grown apathetic in their walk with God. A kind of spiritual malaise set in. It's not that they stopped going to the temple; they still went through the motions of worship, but that's all it was. They were spiritually bored and that's a dangerous place to be. When we're spiritually bored we become careless in our walk with God and that's what had happened in Malachi's day.

Malachi's book is easy to find: it's not only the last book in the Minor Prophets, but it's the last in the entire Old Testament. After God speaks through Malachi He won't speak again for 400 years. Have you ever gotten the "silent treatment"? After Malachi God went silent for 400 years! But not forever. The next word from God would be to an old priest named Zechariah. The silence was broken with these words: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, your prayer has been heard." What a great way to break the silence.

Then God said, "Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John." We know him as John the Baptist.

Malachi looks forward to John's ministry of preparing the way of the Lord through repentance.

What's interesting about this is one of the last things God said through Malachi 400 years earlier was to look forward to John's coming. Malachi 3:1 says, "*See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me.*" As a matter of fact, when Jesus spoke about John, He said, "*This is the one about whom it is written: 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you'*" (Mt 11:14). That's a direct quote from Malachi 3. Notice John's role was one of preparation. He wasn't the main event; he was all about preparation for the main event; preparation for Christmas. You might say John was a siren. Not a distant siren but one right behind you. His job was to get people to slow down and even to stop. John is really the one to teach us how to do Advent.

But how would he prepare the way? Listen to the words of Matthew, "*In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.' This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: 'A voice of one calling in the wilderness, Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him'*" (3:1-3). He goes on and describes John as a guy who wore clothes made of camel hair and ate bugs and wild honey. John wasn't a guy you would invite to your Christmas party, but people from all over Judea went out to hear him and the result was many wanted to make a change.

John was a siren. His job was to get people to stop and take inventory. The operative word here is *repentance*. It means to turn; to change directions. What if you knew tomorrow night the President or some other VIP would be in your home? What would you do? You might do a lot of things, but I know one thing you'd do—clean your house! When someone like that comes to your house you need to look around and see what needs to be done to prepare. "God forbid he stumbles on my dirty laundry, or opens that closet I've been stuffing full of junk, or comes into my bathroom and sees mildew growing in the shower stall."

John's job was to announce the King is coming any day and you'd better stop what you're doing and clean your house. Malachi said the same thing to the people of his day. Throughout this book he blames the people for not fearing God and honoring his name.

In Hebrew the word *honor* means to be heavy. When you honor someone it means you treat them as a heavyweight in your life, someone of extreme importance. God says here, "Listen, you need to clean house. One by one he goes through the areas of their lives where they need to do some housecleaning. I want us to look at those as a way of reflecting on our own lives and evaluating if we're prepared for the coming of Christ.

Malachi points to several areas where we need to clean house.

Questioning God's love

"I have loved you," says the LORD. "But you ask, 'How have you loved us?' 'Was not Esau Jacob's brother?' declares the LORD. "Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated, and I have turned his hill country into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals" (1:2–3).

The first area is foundational. It goes to the heart of our relationship with God. God opens with a declaration, "I have loved you." That's always where God starts. He doesn't start with how badly you've messed up or with "do this and do that." He starts with "I have loved you." That's the foundation for everything. We wouldn't even know God unless He loved us first.

But the people aren't convinced. They ask, "How have you loved us?" Behind this is a "what have you done for me lately" kind of attitude. It's like, "If you loved me, I wouldn't have lost my job." Or "If you loved me my husband wouldn't have left." But God doesn't get into all of that. Instead, He digs back into the beginnings of His relationship with them as descendants of Jacob. He reminds them, "I have loved Jacob but Esau I have hated."

This bothers us. How can God hate Esau? That's not fair! But "hate" is a relative term here. In the Hebrew language "hate" can simply mean to be the one not chosen. God is simply saying He chose or preferred Jacob instead of Esau. We still want to know why. Why would God choose one and not the other? We don't get an answer. The answer is, just because. Theologians call this the doctrine of election. It's not meant to cause us to doubt God's goodness but rather to appreciate His gracious love. Many years earlier Moses asked the children of Israel, "Do you know why God chose you? Not because you were the largest nation or the most powerful or even the most righteous. He chose you just because."

God uses this to convince us we're indeed loved by Him. It's even more convincing when you fast forward to today and ask Him, "How have you loved us?" And He says, "I sent my only Son to bear the penalty for your sin. I opened your eyes to that and drew you near and now you're mine." We ask, Why? And He says, just because.

Advent is a time to evaluate your love relationship with God. When we drift away from God we begin to doubt His love. Do you know His "just because" love? Do you feel secure in it? Do you wake up in the morning relieved to remember He loves you? When I became a Christian at age 17 the idea that overwhelmed

me the most was I was loved and nothing I could ever do would change that. It was that which compelled me to change. It wasn't the other way around. It wasn't, "If you change, then I'll love you." That's religion. The gospel, on the other hand, is "He loves me, therefore I want to change. I can change."

Offering unworthy sacrifices

The second area to evaluate is the quality of what we offer up to God. Starting in 1:6 and extending all the way through 2:9 Malachi indicts the spiritual leaders of his day—the priests.

"A son honors his father, and a slave his master. If I am a father, where is the honor due me? If I am a master, where is the respect due me?" says the LORD Almighty. "It is you priests who show contempt for my name. But you ask, 'How have we shown contempt for your name?' By offering defiled food on my altar. But you ask, 'How have we defiled you?' By saying that the LORD's table is contemptible. 8 When you offer blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice lame or diseased animals, is that not wrong? Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?" says the LORD Almighty (verses 6–8).

Old Testament law required people to offer sacrifices from their flocks and herds. The temptation was to bring God a worthless animal. If they had an animal in their flock that was no good for breeding and wouldn't get much of a price at the butcher shop, they'd give it to the Lord. God says: I don't want those tainted sacrifices. He even tells them to shut the doors of the temple!

We no longer offer animal sacrifices because Christ is our once-for-all sacrifice. He's the lamb of God who bore the full penalty of our sin. But the New Testament does talk about offerings. In Romans 12:1 Paul tells us in light of God's mercy, the only reasonable response is to offer ourselves as spiritual sacrifices. The sacrifice we bring God today is our own lives. But God says: I want all of you. No leftovers. What does it mean for us to give God less than the best? What does it mean to offer Him leftovers today? Here are some ideas:

» I offer Him the leftovers of my time when I can spend several hours in an evening watching TV but just five minutes reading His Word and praying.

» We offer Him leftovers when we bring to our careers our best energy, our best talent, our best motivation, but when it comes to serving the body of Christ we either sit on the sidelines or look for something that requires the least amount of energy.

» We offer Him leftovers when we watch the 49ers score a touchdown and leap off the sofa in jubilation, but in worship we sit passively with our hands in our pockets.

How would you feel if you came here on Sunday morning and I was unprepared to preach to you? What if it was very clear I hadn't given much thought to this at all? You'd be offended.

That's how God feels. God says: "Don't bring me your leftovers." I challenge you to give God your best. I think of the men who show up here at 3:00 am to prepare food for Men's Fraternity. I think of all the folks at our North campus who set up for church every Sunday morning. I think of our Sunday School teachers and youth leaders who pour their lives into our kids. These people are giving God their best. Advent is a time to ask ourselves, am I giving God my best, or just the leftovers?

Unfaithfulness in marriage

"My name will be great among the nations, from where the sun rises to where it sets. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to me, because my name will be great among the nations," says the LORD Almighty. "But you profane it by saying, 'The Lord's table is defiled,' and, 'Its food is contemptible' (verses 11–12).

A third area to evaluate is our marriage. We think the institution of marriage is in trouble today, but it was in trouble in Malachi's day as well. He mentions unfaithfulness here. They were being unfaithful to God and to one another. This came out most of all, as it does with us, in their love life. First, the men of Israel were marrying foreign women. The issue here is not race. The issue is faith. God had told His people to marry within their faith, otherwise their own hearts would be led astray to worship other gods.

"And you say, 'What a burden!' and you sniff at it contemptuously," says the LORD Almighty. "When you bring injured, lame or diseased animals and offer them as sacrifices, should I accept them from your hands?" says the LORD. "Cursed is the cheat who has an acceptable male in his flock and vows to give it, but then sacrifices a blemished animal to the Lord. For I am a great king," says the LORD Almighty, "and my name is to be feared among the nations" (verses 13–16).

But that's not all. The men of Israel were casually divorcing their wives, probably to run off with these foreign women. They were treating the marriage covenant as something they could cast aside like an old pair of shoes.

Notice what she's called here: She is your "partner." That word means to be united or joined together. It harkens back to the "one flesh" teaching of Genesis 2. He also calls her she's "the wife of your youth." Not "your youthful wife" but "the wife of your youth." She's the one who caught your eye; the one you fell in love with; the one who put you through school and stuck with you when you barely made enough money to pay the rent; the one who bore your children, wiped their noses, changed their diapers and drove them to soccer practice. Now you're going to leave her? Finally He calls her "the wife of your marriage covenant." God enters into covenant with us. He's faithful to that and He reminds us here marriage is a covenant too. Next to our covenant with God, the most meaningful covenant a man can make is with his wife. You can't disregard that covenant and

expect God to just go along with it. "Oh no big deal. I'm flexible. I just want you to be happy." There's so much more at stake here than just our own happiness.

Verses 15–16 are considered some of the most difficult verses in the Bible to translate. You may have noticed I've been preaching from a different translation the past few months—the NIV 2011. I believe it's a very good translation, but no translation is perfect. The NIV, NASB and ESV all translate it very different. We don't have time to go into all of this but I understand these verses to be saying this: When you entered into the marriage covenant I made you one in both body and spirit. Maintaining that oneness is essential not just for your relationship with me, but for the raising up of children who will know me. There is a lot at stake here. You may not think you're harming anybody but you're doing violence to the very one I called you to care for and protect. So guard your heart.

Now we know there are certain circumstances in which divorce is permissible. These people were practicing easy, casual divorce. Both Jesus and Paul taught that infidelity or abandonment can legitimately be grounds for divorce (see our Position Paper). But right now I want to just encourage you to evaluate this area of your life. If you're unmarried, are you in a relationship with an unbeliever? Are you contemplating marriage to someone who doesn't share your love for Christ and your passion to serve Him? To do so would be an act of unfaithfulness to your brothers and sisters in Christ as well to your God. You'll cause immeasurable pain for your spouse, your children, your church and yourself. If you're married, are you on guard? If you're contemplating divorce, are you doing that based on what God says or the world says? Even if you're not, are you protecting and nurturing your marriage covenant? Advent is a great time to do that.

Withholding tithes

"Ever since the time of your ancestors you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you," says the LORD Almighty. "But you ask, 'How are we to return?' "Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me. But you ask, 'How are we robbing you?' "In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse—your whole nation—because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it" (3:7–10).

A fourth area to evaluate is in the area of money and giving. The Israelites were commanded to tithe. They were to give a tenth of everything to the Lord. This started with a kind of tax they paid to the Levites which amounted to 1/10 of their income. When they harvested their crops, one out of every ten sheaves was offered to the Lord. It came straight off the top. Why do that? They

were making a statement about ownership. The person making the tithe was saying, "I'm not really the owner of all of this. It doesn't all belong to me. I'm a steward. I'm managing the resources of another. God is the owner and when I give I'm giving to Him what's already His."

In the New Testament we're never commanded to tithe in the sense of giving a strict 10% of everything. I know many of you do that and I applaud that, but the teaching of the New Testament is that in light of all that God has done for us through Christ, we're to give back to Him generously, sacrificially, cheerfully, regularly, wisely, proportionately. The question isn't how much of your money you'll give to the Lord but how much of His money you'll keep for yourself. God wants us to be so thrilled with His grace and mercy and so excited about the chance to support the advancement of His work in the world that we're eager to give.

We live in a very expensive part of the country. Many of you are struggling to make ends meet. The idea of giving anything close to 10% is scary. But God makes a challenge here to all of us, ***"Test me in this...and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it."*** The issue here isn't "how much" but "will I trust Him?" Most of us are blessed with a degree of prosperity people in other lands envy. We have choices and options others only dream of. What better time than Advent to evaluate our hearts and our giving.

Do you hear the siren? Advent is a time to prepare. A time to do some housecleaning. Evaluate your love relationship with God. Evaluate whether or not you're offering up to Him your best or just the leftovers. Evaluate your marriage. Evaluate your giving.

The good news is Jesus came to purify and wash us.

I don't know about you, but I don't come out looking very good when I evaluate myself in light of these things. It's like I've just been slapped in the face four times. But it comforts me to remember Advent is just the beginning. Advent is about preparation. What are we preparing for? We're preparing for the coming of Christ. Malachi talks about that as well.

"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. 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. 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, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years (3:1-4).

Who is he talking about when he says, "The Lord you are seeking will come to his temple?" Clearly, it's Jesus. He came to the temple right after His birth. He came again right before His death. But when Jesus shows up, what will He be like? What will He do? Whatever it is, it's clear things won't stay the same. There are two images used here: First, He'll be like a refiner's fire. He "will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver..." Notice it doesn't say Jesus will be like a forest fire or an incinerator's fire. Both of those destroy indiscriminately, violently. There's nothing left by the time the fire gets done. Many of us are afraid Jesus is like that. Once you let Him into your life, He'll burn up everything and there will be nothing left of you. But that's not what He's like. God wants to change us, but He doesn't want to destroy us. A refiner's fire purifies. He changes us!

The second image is of Jesus as "launderer's soap." In our culture we have all kinds of soft, gentle, and sweet soaps, but launderer's soap wasn't nice; it was tough stuff. It was called "fuller's soap." It was used to wash the hands of blacksmiths or deep dirt out of stiff clothing. Malachi gives us this picture of Jesus: He's like a mother washing her family's clothing in a stream until everything is fresh and clean. It's a hands-on labor of love.

I'm so glad I have this picture of Jesus. It gives me hope! He's like the refiner's fire—hot, passionate, burning away all that's not gold in my life. He's like a launderer's soap—He takes me in His hands and plunges me into the soapy water, churning and turning until the dirt in my life is washed out. And what is the result? ***"On the day when I act," says the LORD Almighty, "they will be my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as a father has compassion and spares his son who serves him"*** (3:17). The result is I'm His treasured possession, a child of God.

How did Jesus do this? How does He purify us? How does He make us clean? How could we who are impure and filthy become His treasured possession? Only through the cross. All this is a picture of the work of redemption accomplished on the cross. Through the cross we're purified; through the cross we're washed. All we must do is obey the word we've heard throughout the Minor Prophets and see once again here in Malachi 3:7, ***"Return to me and I will return to you,"*** says the Lord God Almighty.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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