

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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What God Values

Malachi 2:17-3:5

In a popular holiday tune, Burl Ives sings: "Silver and gold, silver and gold / Everyone wishes for silver and gold / How do you measure its worth? / Just by the pleasure it gives here on earth. / Silver and gold, silver and gold / Mean so much more when I see / Silver and gold decorations / On every Christmas tree." The song is one of the memorable moments in "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer," where Ives plays the part of a banjo-picking, singing snowman named Sam.

Silver and gold. They add a certain richness and extravagance to our holiday decorations and presentations. During the rest of the year, our homes and sanctuaries may appear more simple and modest. But during the Christmas season, our interior spaces start to glisten and shine with the look of precious metals. Even if we don't actually own any of the real thing, we can at least relax in the glow and glimmer of silver and gold. I think Burl Ives would be pleased.

But then, into the serenity of our shiny holiday celebrations comes the prophet Malachi, who doesn't seem to be enthusiastic about holiday bling. Malachi is the messenger we meet in today's text. He speaks both to and on behalf of God's people in their relationship with God. And right now, God's people seem very distressed and confused. They've always believed and professed that God is just. God isn't oblivious to or disengaged from the affairs of this world and the plight of his people. God sees and knows the lives of the righteous and the wicked. God is responsive to the sufferings and struggles of the oppressed and those held captive. He acts on their behalf to liberate and to set things right, punishing the wicked and rewarding the virtuous. So God's people live by the foundational conviction that God is a righteous judge who will ultimately bring about his reign of justice and peace in the world.

But right now, God's people are wondering if God is so just after all. Once again, as in times past, they're asking why the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer. Why do the evildoers seem so blessed, with all their silver and gold, while the good people struggle to scratch out a living each day? Why do those who are living by God's commands face relentless hardship and trouble, while those who could care less about God's will seem to go about their merry way, enjoying the comforts and securities of this present life?

And notice that God's people don't hold back in their complaints. In fact, in this particular case, they even take their grievances a step further. They accuse God of not only being silent or inactive in the face of evildoers, but of actually considering them good, or delighting in them! It's as if all the boundaries between good and evil are getting blurred. Does God really care about what's right and what's wrong? "Where is the God of justice?" (2:17).

But note too that God has some accusations of his own. Through the messenger Malachi, he charges his people with not living up to their part in the covenant. By their own conduct, they've contributed to the current state of affairs. Though they're quick to question God's

intention to vindicate goodness, they should step back and examine their own commitment to doing what's right. God himself hasn't changed, but they themselves clearly need to be changed.

And God promises to do just that. He says that he will restore his people, and the world, to purity again. God's messenger, the prophet, will clear obstacles to the Lord's coming and pave the way for the arrival of God's judgment. This divine visit will establish God's reign and transform the world. You can begin to see why, in early Christian interpretation, the messenger here in Malachi was sometimes identified with John the Baptist, whom we encountered in this morning's other Scripture reading. Earlier in Luke, we meet him at the beginning of his ministry. "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him ... And all mankind will see God's salvation'" (Luke 3:4, 6). Followed by, "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?'" (v. 7). Not the kind of message you would expect to see on a holiday greeting card.

It doesn't take long to sense that Malachi and John don't fit comfortably into the glisten and sparkle of the season. Yet Malachi does have an interest in something shiny, namely silver and gold. In addition to comparing God's arrival to the cleansing power of a launderer's soap, Malachi says that the coming of the Lord will be a refining event. "He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver" (3:3). The purpose of refining these precious metals is to cleanse them of impurities and contaminants. The process isn't easy, but the outcome is worth it. God's goal is a people, and a world, cleansed of sin, purified from the contaminating effects of evil and death. A new heaven and new earth, inhabited by a new humankind, remade in the image of Christ and living under the loving reign of God.

We were pointed in this direction last Sunday as we reflected on the significance of Christian baptism. Recall that baptism signifies that you have died and been raised with Christ. By God's grace, you've been brought out of death and into life. But that's not a quick, easy, or painless process. It's a kind of refining, an experience of purification. That's part of the symbolism of the white robe in baptism. The white robe signifies purity and the washing away of sins. It reminds us of our spiritual cleansing and rebirth in Christ. Here in our church, once the act of baptism is complete, the new believer dries off, puts their old clothes back on, and returns to their seat in the pew with the rest of you. The white robe goes back into the closet. We didn't require Austin to wear it again today, or to put it on every day this past week as he went about his life and work.

But what the robe signifies, being re-created in Christ, is a daily reality for a believer. The whiteness of the robe says something crucial about the direction you want your life to head. The reformer Martin Luther once pointed out that baptism is a once-in-a-lifetime experience that takes our entire lives to complete. He stated that baptism "signifies that the old Adam in us, together with all sins and evil lusts, should be drown by daily sorrow and repentance and be put to death, and that the new man should come forth daily and rise up, cleansed and righteous, to live forever in God's presence." Luther is also said to have observed elsewhere, "the old Adam is a mighty good swimmer" who doesn't drown easily.¹

God has come to us in Christ in order to destroy the evil in us and in the world. And the promise of Christ's appearing is God's assurance that what he has begun will be brought to completion. "But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? ... He will sit as a purifier and refiner of silver" (3:2, 3).

Silver and gold. These are precious things. And the way that these precious metals are used as images in today's text tells us that though the process of refinement is hard, the outcome is something of great value. God places great value on that which is being purified. God values his people. God values the world that he has made. God values his redeeming relationship with humankind. These are precious to the Lord.

Several years ago, a team of researchers identified a phenomenon that they called "The Ikea Effect." Some of you may recognize Ikea. It's a Swedish-based company whose products usually arrive with some assembly required. The researchers did a series of experiments in which participants assembled Ikea products, folded origami projects, and built sets of Legos. The study concluded, "[Participants experienced] the increase in valuation of self-made products ... [They] saw their amateurish creations ... as similar in value to the creations of experts." In other words, the researchers found that when you get personally involved in a project, you have a greater affection for the end product—even when you know it's far from perfect.²

Though we are clearly far from perfect, to put it mildly, remember that God still values what God has made. God loves what God has made. It's important to note that the book of Malachi begins with God telling his people, "I have loved you" (1:2). Those words set the tone for everything that follows. All the back and forth between God and his people is framed by this opening affirmation of God's faithfulness to his covenant with them. Whatever else God will say to his people—accusations, questions, warnings, judgments, and promises—are motivated by and flow from his great and unmerited love. Love has been, and still is, the foundation of God's relationship with us.

Like God's people in today's text, we too may struggle with what feels like the gap between the promise of God's love and the realities that we experience in the present, right in front of us each day. We too may wrestle with questions about where is God's justice when so much that we see and hear looks like God is unresponsive to both the world's plight and our personal pain. Yes, God is loving and righteous, but how is he loving us and where is he acting on behalf of justice?

I believe one of the ways God is doing so is by reminding us of what he values, and how that should shape what we value, especially during this time of the year. Everywhere we turn, there's silver and gold. Maybe not the real stuff, but certainly enough holiday bling to blind us to the gifts that hold the greatest worth.

God has shown us, most of all through his coming in Christ, the things that are most precious to him. Love, righteousness, redemption, reconciliation, peace, and the flourishing of humankind within the whole of creation under his reign. So during this Christmas season, as we continue to await the Lord's appearing, may he, out of his great love for us, continue to refine and purify us. May he remove from you and me the contaminants of greed, selfishness, hatred, pride, self-righteousness, unfaithfulness, deception, apathy, hardheartedness, violence, and whatever attitudes and actions resist his will for the coming of his kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven. And may the things that are precious to God determine the things that are precious to you, the things that you value—God's kingdom, love of neighbor, peace, the lives of the poor and the suffering, your church, your relationships with your family and friends, your service to others, your life in Christ, and the promise of his coming. For he himself remains the supreme treasure, the gift of greatest value.

¹ William H. Willimon, *Worship as Pastoral Care* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979) 159.

² Michael Norton, Daniel Mochon, Dan Ariely, "The Ikea Effect." Social Science Research Network (March 4, 2013).