

It's What's Inside That Matters!
Malachi 2:17-3:4

Several years ago, when the children of friends of were three and five, the 3-year-old just had a ball in the kitchen pantry while mom was in conversation on the phone in another room. She became concerned when she realized the house was remarkably quiet, a sign to any parent that all is not well. Mom excused herself from the conversation to check things out, only to find her daughter had unlabeled every canned good in the pantry. Obviously upset, but wanting to finish her conversation with her friend, she picked up her daughter and carried her into the other room away from the mess and to keep an eye her.

Her 5-year-old son, however, noticing how upset mom looked with all the cans de-labeled, decided to do her a favor. He got the scotch-tape from the drawer and began putting the labels back on the cans. By the time mom finished her phone conversation, her son had just nicely finished the project. You should have seen his face when mom came into the kitchen – he was so proud of himself! Mom ... she just hugged her son and started laughing. Supper, on the other hand, was quite interesting for the next several days.

Like relabeled cans, it is far too easy to wear a label without the having the goods. Thus far, Malachi has emphasized that the God who is totally committed to us expects us to be totally devoted to Him. We know that. And in an effort to express our devotion we put on the label of “Christian.” We wear t-shirts with Christian themes. We put fancy fish or cross emblems on our cars. We post stories with Christian themes. We sound real “Christian” when we talk to each other. We faithfully (I trust) give our tithes, offerings, and Christian service. We are on the prayer chain. We listen to Christian music. These are good labels, provided what's on the outside is what's on the inside. But if you're expecting peaches and get spinach instead that jello salad just won't taste the same.

That's the essence of what God tells us in our text (**Read Here**). God says, "You weary me with your words" and we might add actions. The Hebrew word translated *weary* alludes to a statement we know well: *sick and tired*. "I'm sick and tired of your pretending." We might well respond like the Israelites, "Hey, wait a minute! Why are you so down on us? After all, we're doing all the right stuff." Ever think like that after a reprimand from your boss? "Man, there's no pleasing him. I did my job and that isn't good enough. What does a guy have to do to get a break around here?"

God responds, "It's not what you do but your attitude in doing it. I'm sick and tired because you think that not so bad is really good. You go through the motions but where's your heart?" Paul, addressing Jewish Christians who thought Gentiles had to follow Jewish law and tradition, understood what God was getting at, "*You are not a true Jew just because you were born of Jewish parents or because you have gone through the ceremony of circumcision. No, a true Jew is one whose heart is right with God. And true circumcision is not merely obeying the letter of the law; rather, it is a change of heart produced by the Spirit. And a person with a changed heart seeks praise from God, not from people*" (Rm.2:28-29). But he could have addressed us similarly saying, "You are not a true Christian just because you were born of Christian parents or because you were baptized. No, a true Christian is one whose heart is right with God. And true baptism is not getting wet; rather, it's a change of heart produced by God's Spirit." What's inside needs to match the label!

But, we don't like to look bad, do we? So we try to reflect it back on the one who's pointed out our failings. It's like I heard out on the ball field the other day, "You can't catch." "Oh, yeah, well you can't throw." We do that with God, too: "I may not have the best attitude, but you seem to favor the ones who are worse sinners than me. When's it my turn?"

God responds: *“You want justice? Okay, but are you ready for what you’re asking? You claim to be doing and saying the right things; but is your label of action and talk a true reflection of what’s inside? One is coming will remove anything that is polluting you. That will take refining you with fire; can you endure the flame?”*

Now refining is not something that God does because God is mad and upset. Rather, God wants us to be the best we can be. Our refining has four purposes.

#1. God wants to enhance our relationship with him so that we can “share in God’s holiness” (Hb.12:10). Refining is like the discipline of a parent. To us, the child, it seems God is trying to make our lives miserable. We must remember, however, that the pain is not because of our struggle with God but our struggle against sin. The writer of Hebrews shares it this way, *“You have not yet given your lives in your struggle against sin. Have you forgotten the encouraging words God spoke to you as his children? He said, “My child, don’t make light of the Lord’s discipline, and don’t give up when he corrects you. For the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes each one he accepts as his child”* (12:4-6). Refining makes it possible to better know God.

#2. Refining will actually make us strong in faith. I have a colleague who before becoming a pastor worked as a robotics engineer with Northern Die Cast in Petoskey. One of the products they make is the metal riser for compound bows. Due to the amount of force put on the bow, the metal has to be very strong. So the metal goes through a refining process to remove the impurities, the more pure, the stronger the metal is. One day, while orienting a group of new employees, the management decided to prove the importance of their tasks by making a riser out of impure metal. The riser was installed into a bow and the string pulled back, as if to shoot an arrow. Before the string was pulled back ten inches, the bow broke – right at the metal riser.

Not only do we need to be pure to have the quality relationship God intends for us to have, we need to be strong so that the pressure and forces in the world cannot break us away from God.

Paul reminds us that “*our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms*” (Eph.6:12).

#3. *God wants the world to know how precious to Him we are.* When silver is refined, it is heated until it becomes as fluid as water. In this liquid state, all the impurities come to the top and the refiner skims them off. Silver is a precious metal and the more pure it becomes, the more valuable it is. When we accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior, the refiner, the Holy Spirit, comes into his temple, which we learned last week is both individual Christians and the Church. You and the church are precious to God, so precious that Jesus came and gave his life so that we might be saved. And, the more pure we become, the more valuable we are. So, the refiner starts a fire – you will recall that when the Holy Spirit came into the church at Pentecost his symbol was of a flame of fire. He heats us up slowly until our hearts become soft and pliable, ready to be used of God. As we become 100% devoted to God we become ever more liquid and the Holy Spirit calmly and carefully removes the impurities as we let go of them. Refinement is a process. It does not happen quickly.

#4. *The more pure we become, the more we reflect God.* When the silver is pure, the refiner will be able to look into the pot of melted silver and see his reflection as if looking into a polished mirror. Paul says, “*We, who all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness in ever increasing glory*” (2Cor.3:18). The more pure we become, the more God can see his reflection in us and the more others can see God in us. We are being refined so that others can see God and desire to be restored to him.

God wants to refine us until he can see His reflection in us. God will purify us with forgiveness, love, and power. It really is what’s inside that matters! Our lives, do they agree with the label. If you look into the mirror, do see God? How clear is the image? Let’s make sure our lives agree with the label we wear: Christian (little Christs).