

## Keep On Keeping On Malachi 4:1-6

One balmy June morning black limousines and television camera trucks lined the curb in front of the old red brick Assumption Catholic Church. Soon after cameras and reporters were in place, a small group of nuns and priests arrived, clustered about a wisp of a woman in a white muslin sari. The tiny figure moved with unusual grace up the steps of the church, waving at a cluster of children nearby and brushing past the reporters crowding the doorway.

This celebrity somehow managed to understate her own arrival. As a 1979 Nobel Prize winner and world famous figure, she could have commanded an airport welcome by a host of government bigwigs, addressed a joint session of Congress, or attracted thousands at one of the city's great cathedrals. Instead, she went as inconspicuously as possible to a troubled and neglected corner of the city to establish an outpost for nine of her Sisters of Charity.

Since she wouldn't come to them, the power brokers, mayor, and city officials had come to her. The press, irreverent with politicians, was more restrained with this little woman from the streets of Calcutta. Still she had to dodge the boom mikes coming at her like spears.

"What do you hope to accomplish here?" one reporter shouted.

"The joy of loving and being loved," she smiled, her eyes sparkling in the camera lights.

"That takes a lot of money doesn't it?" another reporter threw out the obvious question. Everything in Washington D.C. costs money; and the more it costs, the more important it is.

Mother Teresa shook her head. "No, it takes a lot of sacrifice."

We are about to celebrate the arrival of another unassuming figure. Bigwigs didn't rush to see him, though some wise men did show up about two years later. Instead, the lowest of common folk rushed to greet him - shepherds. He had entered with little fanfare.

But the reason Jesus came was not dissimilar to Mother Teresa's. If asked what he hoped to accomplish Jesus may well have replied, "The joy of loving and being loved." With all Israel anticipating the messiah and an earthly return of the kingdom of Israel someone may well have asked about the financial cost. But Jesus would have replied, "No, it takes a lot of sacrifice."

What we will soon celebrate with quite a little fanfare is a taste of what God has given in Malachi as a glimpse of what is yet to be. **(Read Text here.)**

The day is approaching when righteousness will overcome the wicked, when the serpent's head will be crushed by the heel of the seed of Adam and Eve. God in these closing words reminds the Israelites that they are the nation through whom the righteousness of God would come. How wonderful, don't you agree, that, as God closes what we know as the final book of the Old Testament, God would remind the nation of the coming Messiah who would be the one to bring righteousness to earth? And though they had misconceptions as to what the Messiah's role would be and how righteousness would come, Jesus is the "sun of righteousness" who would "rise with healing in its wings."

The book of Malachi, I trust, has awakened us from mediocrity in worship of God and service to God and others, and has strengthen us in faithfulness to our faithful God and our covenant relationship with Him. God wants us to experience "the joy of loving and being loved." But this experience "takes a lot of sacrifice." Remember God's command to his people, "Be holy because I am holy." Now as God concludes his message, He gives the directive to remember the decrees and laws of Moses. God gives this directive because the law gives instruction on how to live holy, set apart, and different from the world. "Do not be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind," Paul tells us (Rm.12:2).

Paul also reminds us, "It is by grace you have been saved, through faith" (Eph 2:8). We are saved and brought into right relationship with God only by God's grace which we accept in faith. But, as Billy Graham said, "Faith that saves has one distinguishing quality; saving faith is a faith that produces obedience, it is a faith that brings about a way of life." We must understand that our goal as believers, as children of God, is to seek what we can do to please God, not what He

can do for us. It's not about us, it's about God. Holiness, then, is obeying God. Jerry Bridges, in his book *Pursuit of Holiness* puts it well: "It is time for us Christians to face up to our responsibility for holiness. Too often we say we are "defeated" by this or that sin. No, we are not defeated; we are simply disobedient."

We are so easily tempted away from total devotion to God by thinking that as long as we are doing something *for* God and *in* God's name that we are then living holy lives. No! Holiness is obeying God. A brother in the same order as Mother Teresa once came to her complaining about a superior whose rules, he felt, were interfering with his ministry. "My vocation is to work for lepers," he told Mother Teresa. "I want to spend myself for lepers."

She stared at him a moment, then smiled. "Brother," she said gently, "your vocation is not to work for lepers; your vocation is to belong to Jesus."

Total devotion requires that we be holy ... and holiness is not doing for God; it's obeying God. Loving God, really loving God, means living out His commands, no matter the cost.

Jesus is our supreme example. In the coming weeks we will commemorate and celebrate that Jesus "did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in *obedience* to God and died a criminal's death on a cross" (Ph.6-8). Shortly before Jesus obediently gave up his very life he prayed, "I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do" (Jn 17:4). Holiness prevailed. Jesus was obedient, even to death on the cross.

God wants us to experience "the joy of loving and being loved." Jesus tells us, "Those who obey my commands are the ones who love me" (Jn 14.2). But obedience can be hard ... as this story from *Loving God* by Chuck Colson illustrates (pgs.138-9):

*No one was surprised when Patti Awan stood during the informal praise time at the Sunday evening service. A young Sunday school teacher with an air of quiet maturity, she had given birth to a healthy son a few months earlier, a first child for her and her husband Javy. The congregation settled back for a report of the baby's progress and his parents' thanksgiving. They were totally unprepared for what followed.*

*Hanging onto the podium before her, Patti began. "Four years ago this week, a young girl sat crying on the floor of a New Jersey apartment, devastated by the news of a lab report. Unmarried and alone, she just learned that she was pregnant."*

*The congregation grew completely quiet. Patti's tear choked voice indicated just who that young woman was.*

*"I considered myself a Christian at the time," She continued. "But I had found out about Christ while in the drug scene. After I learned about Him I knew I wanted to commit to Him, but I couldn't give up my old friends or my old habits. So I was drifting between two worlds – in one still smoking dope every day and sleeping with the man who lived in the apartment below mine; in the other going to church, witnessing to others, and working with the church youth group.*

*"But, being pregnant ripped through the hypocrisy of my double life. I had been meaning to 'get right with God,' but I kept slipping back. Now I couldn't live a nice, clean Christian life like all those church people. I felt the only answer was to wipe the slate clean. I would get an abortion; no one in the church would ever know.*

*"The clinic scheduled an abortion date. I was terrified, but my boyfriend was adamant. My sister was furious with me for being so stupid as to get pregnant. Finally, in desperation I wrote my parents. They were staunch Catholics, and I knew they would support me if I decided to have the baby. My mother called me: 'If you don't get an abortion, I don't want to see you while you're pregnant. Your life will be ruined and you'll deserve it.'*

*"I had always been desperately dependent on other people. But I knew this was one decision I had to make alone. I was looking out my bedroom window one night when I thought clearly for the first time in weeks. I realized I either believed this Christianity or I didn't believe it. And if I believed in Christ, then I couldn't do this. God is real, I thought, even if I've never lived like he is.*

*“That decision was a point of no return. I put my faith in the God of the Bible, not the God I had made up in my head. I was still everything I never wanted to be – pregnant, alone, deserted by family, and rejected by the one I had loved. Yet for the first time in my life I was really peaceful, because I knew for the first time I was being obedient.*

*“When I went to an obstetrician and told him of my decision to have the baby and why I had made that choice, he refused to charge me for the pre-natal care and delivery. I confessed my double life to the church and through the support of Christians was able to move away from my old friends to an apartment of my own. I began going to a Christian counseling agency and felt God leading me to give the baby up for adoption.*

*“I had a beautiful baby girl and called her Sarah. She was placed with a childless Christian couple, and we all felt God’s hand in the decision.*

*“And so that’s why I praise God this evening. I thought in the depths of my despair that my life was ruined, but I knew I had to at least be obedient in taking responsibility for my sin. But today, because of that very despair and obedience, I have what I never thought I could – a godly husband and now a baby of our own. But what matters more than anything is that I have what I was searching for so desperately before – Peace with God.*

Holiness is obeying God. Obedience is not easy, it’s hard; in fact, “it takes a lot of sacrifice.” But the wonderful reality is that when we are totally devoted to God we are then able to experience just how totally devoted to us God is. That’s why it’s so necessary that we help each other Keep on Keeping on in our relationship with God. I will. Will You?