

The Gift of Peace

It's Christmas Eve and their family just opened presents. Sure, there was a little bit of chaos with wrapping paper every where but overall everything went well. Now, to their surprise the children are playing nicely together. The husband and wife are cuddled up together on the couch close to the fireplace. Everything is so peaceful. The husband leans over to his wife and says, "I haven't given you your present yet." And he proceeds to pull a small black box from out of his pocket. And honestly, her first thought was, "Oh boy, I hope I don't have to return this." But then she got excited. "Maybe he bought that necklace that they were advertising on all those commercials. Maybe it's that new pair of gold earrings that I've been leaving hints about." But that's when she opened it and her face dropped. "Umm, honey, what is this?" Her husband said, "It's an unrefined golden nugget, it's worth a lot of money! Do you like it?"

Ladies, what do you think? Did this husband do a good job? Would you get excited to receive an unrefined gold nugget as a present? Sure, it might be worth some money but right now that's not a present. It looks like an old rock with some golden spots on it! Some ladies out there might fantasize about getting that diamond ring, or a golden bracelet or silver earrings, but no one asks for an unrefined golden nugget. No woman fantasizes about receiving that gift. Golden jewelry is a good gift but unrefined gold is a useless gift.

And did you know that is how the Bible describes our hearts? Before we knew Jesus our hearts were hard as a rock-hard heart full of impurities. A rock-hard heart that didn't believe in God and couldn't do anything good to please him because we didn't know him. Even though so many of us know Jesus now, since we still live in a sinful world our sinful hard heart still shows itself at times. Have you seen your hard heart this last week? Sure there are lots of holidays at this time of year. But it's also very stressful. Did you see your hard heart yell at your family this last week? It's also that time of year when lots of people are asking for your money. There's non-profits, and church, and our building project. Have you felt your hard heart this week when you looked the other way and didn't give a dime? Going through the motions. You've been going to church a long time. You've heard the Christmas story before. And your hard heart is bored. Have you seen your hard heart this week? Have you felt it inside your chest?

Today we are talking about receiving the gift of peace. But how can we have the gift of peace when our hearts are so hard? The Lord does not want our hearts to look like that unrefined gold nugget full of impurities. Our hearts need to be changed. Our hearts need to be refined. Today we learn that peace comes from refinement. Our hearts need to get purified and refined. And the same was true for God's people in the Old Testament. In the last book of the Old Testament, Malachi, in the last words he leaves his people before Jesus came, he leaves a message that their hearts needed to be refined. The Israelites were in exile in Babylonia for a long time but now they returned to Jerusalem. But even though they were physically back, their hearts were still far away from God. Their hearts were hard. So God sent his messenger Malachi to give a message to fix their hearts.

"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. (4:1)

The Lord made it clear that he was coming. He was going to send a messenger to prepare for this coming. Because he was going to come unexpectedly. So God promised to send a messenger. And that messenger's name was John the Baptist. He was the messenger that the book of Malachi prophesied would come. And John the Baptist had a one word message for the people to get their hearts ready for Jesus' coming: "Repent!" He wanted people to look down at their hearts and to be broken by God's law. But when they were broken down by the

law, he point them to Jesus. That's what repentance is: acknowledging your sins and knowing you are forgiven in Jesus' name.

And the people during the time of Malachi desperately needed that message. They didn't know when the Lord was going to come. And like I said before the Israelites at the time of Malachi had some major problems. Their hearts weren't in a good place. They weren't repenting for their sins. They weren't ready for God to come. In the rest of this book we learned that they were really struggling with three sins.

1. Stealing From God.

Through the prophet Malachi, God told his people that they were stealing from him. And like little kids when you point out their faults, said, "What?! How have we been stealing from you?" So God had to point out to them that they were stealing from him by not giving a tithe to the temple. That's 10% of their income. They stopped giving to God. On top of this, they were supposed to bring animal sacrifices to the temple. But instead of bringing their good animals from their flocks. The Israelites were bringing their weird, crippled, mangy animals to the temple. Instead of making a sacrifice that actually cost them something, they were just giving up their leftovers. So God said they were stealing from him. Their hearts were hard.

2. Treating God's temple like a gum ball machine.

You know gum ball machines, right? You stick 25 cents into a gum ball machine and then what do you expect? A gum ball! Then you put in another 25 cents and then what do you expect? Another gum ball! That makes sense with gum ball machines, but that doesn't work with God. The people during Malachi's time were going through all the right motions. They were going to the temple. They would make an animal sacrifice. They would put in their 25 cents. But then they expected God to deliver on his side. They looked around and saw other nations still in power. They weren't getting physically blessed and the wicked people were still prospering. Instead of caring about their relationship with God, they just wanted God for the gifts he could give them. Their hearts were hard.

3. Doubting God's love

Because of this disappointment about their failed gum ball machine God, they started to doubt God's love. They literally said, "It's useless to serve God." They thought to themselves, "What's the point? We go to the temple. We pretend to walk around all sad once in a while and God still isn't blessing us with material blessings. So what's the point? God must not love us. Because of these three big sins, their hearts were far away from the Lord. They became self-reliant and felt that they didn't need God anymore. And God knew this. God saw their hearts full of sin and impurities. Their hearts needed to be refined.

So what about you? If God were to look at your heart this last week, would he see impurities? Have you been struggling with the same sins that the people during the time of Malachi? You have been stealing from God. And like the people during Malachi's time, it's easy to fire back like they did, "Come on, how have I been stealing from God?" By the way you use your possessions. Do you find it so easy to spend money on yourself but struggle to give to God? Do you find it easy to drop hundreds of dollars on Christmas presents, and new electronics, and fancy clothes, but struggle to give to the Lord? Do you pretend that you have nothing to give because of your life position?

Have you been treating God like a gum ball machine lately? Have you thought that God should bless you in a special way because you came to church? Do you think that you should live a life free of suffering because you've been a Christian a long time? Do you boss God around in your life and pray "Lord let my will be done, not yours?" Have you treated God like a gum ball machine?

Have you doubted God's love? Have you been coming to church for so long that you fail to realize the true heights and depths of God's love? Have you heard the Christmas story so many times you just shrug off the fact that Christ came to this world to pay for your sins? Brothers and Sisters in Christ, our hearts need refining. When I look at my heart this last week, I know I need refining. This last week I've had thoughts that I know I shouldn't have thought. I've said things I know I shouldn't have said. And I've done things that I'm not proud of. There have been times I showed how hard my heart really is and I know you have shown your hard heart this week too.

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. (3:2-3)

The Lord is coming back. And who is ready for that? The Israelites and their hard hearts weren't. So the Lord needed to refine their hearts like a gold smith. In the Old Testament times, black smiths and gold smiths had a three step process for refining.

1. Hammer.

Before unrefined golden ore could be turned into something beautiful, first it had to be broken down. This would be done with a hammer. The ore had to be crushed and broken down before it could be formed into something new.

2. Furnace.

Once the unrefined ore was broken down and pulverized it would be put into a furnace. The goldsmith would have to get the fire so hot that all the impurities and dross would be destroyed. But after that, only the gold would be remained.

3. Reshape.

After it was melted down, it could be shaped into something new and beautiful. Whether it is a ring, necklace or bracelet, the gold would be shaped and fashioned into a new state.

That's the three step refining process. And that same process needs to be applied to our hearts. Before we can meet the Lord when he comes back, our hearts need to be refined. We desperately need changing. We need a new heart. Our hard hearts full of selfishness, pride, and arrogance need to be broken down. First we need God's law which is the hammer that crushes us and breaks us down. We need to take the time to look at our sin and have our hard hearts be broken. After we have been broken down God then works on melting away our impurities.

Do you know how God melts away our impurities? Well, he does that through Jesus. Jesus was the one who came to this world, born as a baby, so that he could be our Savior. And he did that by living a perfect life. Jesus' heart was pure and sinless without impurities. But Jesus also faced a hammer. He faced a hammer that pounded nails into his hands and feet. And Jesus also faced a furnace. Jesus went through fires that are hotter than any blacksmith's furnace ever was. On the cross Jesus went through the fires of hell. Jesus faced the hammer and the furnace so that he could give you a new heart. Jesus took on all the impurities of our hearts and melted them away on the cross. Now when Jesus comes back we can be ready for his coming because he gave us a new heart. All of your sins and impurities are forgiven! When God looks at you he doesn't see an ugly rock instead he sees his beautiful masterpiece.

And then finally the last step of refining our hearts is reshaping. After God gave us a new heart and knowing that our sins and impurities have been melted away, God will then continue to

reshape you. Just like how a goldsmith reshapes gold into valuable jewelry, God will continue to reshape you. You will be shaped and molded into someone who loves God and cares about other people. You will be a different person because you have a new heart! We don't do this to get God to forgive us, we live a new life simply to say thank you for what he did for us! And this is still a process. Like I said before we still live in a sinful world and will have sin in this heart. But since we know that Jesus forgave us our sins and gave us a new heart, our lives will continue to change to worship him.

There once was a woman's Bible study that was studying the book of Malachi and they came across these verses. One woman was interested in this image that the Bible used so she decided she wanted to learn more about silversmiths. So the next day she found a silversmith and made an appointment with him to watch him work. She didn't tell him anything about her Bible study she just wanted to learn from him. So she sat and watched him work. He explained about how long he needs to sit by the furnace and to constantly watch the silver as it gets refined. And that's when the woman asked, "Well, how do you know when it's done?" The silversmith laughed and said, "Oh, that's easy. I know it's done when I see my image in the silver's reflection." Through repentance God refines us and changes our hearts to be more and more like Jesus Christ. God changes our hearts and changes our lives so that we look more and more like Jesus. And since our hearts now look like Jesus, God accepts our hearts as a gift.

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. (Malachi 3:4).

Before in the book of Malachi, the people would bring offerings to the temple but God would not accept them because of their hard hearts. But now, after their hearts are refined God will accept their gifts. A hard piece of unrefined gold would be an awful gift to give to a spouse. But after that ore has been broken down and melted and reshaped into a piece of jewelry, it becomes an excellent gift! And that same is true for us. Before we are refined and reshaped and given a new heart, nothing we do can please God. Everything we do will be impacted by our selfishness and pride. But as God refines us and gives us a new heart our gifts become pleasing in his eyes. We can serve God with our offerings and they will be acceptable in his eyes because we have a new heart.

So every day let's look down at our hearts and take a good hard look at the ugliness of sin. All the impurities and dross in our life. And let's confess that sin to God and be crushed by God's law. But let's also look at the cross. Let's look at the cross and see how Jesus went through the fires for us and burned off all our impurities and sins. And then just sit back and see how God reshapes us. He will reshape and fashion us into something beautiful. He will change the way we live and give us the gift of peace with God. Through repentance God gives us peace. So as we prepare again for another Christmas season, let's continue to prepare for Jesus' coming. And let's have peace knowing that God has given us a new and beautiful heart.