

“Are you good?” Mal 3:1-6

“Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

We have this deep longing. All human beings have it. It brings us back to the very beginnings of humanity. To the garden of Eden. We want to hear this voice which once was heard by our first parents: “You are very good.”

You are very good! We want to be good, accepted, embraced, loved with love divine. The reminder about our state before the fall is imprinted on our hearts. We can’t fully erase it.

It is this voice that now speaks in us. Our conscience. It keeps evaluating us. It keeps fuelling our desire to be good, and there are two main ways we try to achieve it. One is by choosing to do something that we consider good.

All people do this. So that they could feel good according to their own criteria. There are so many examples of it around us. Some try to be good by caring for the planet, for recycling, fighting against the climate change.

Many try to be good supporting whatever is the next big thing in the battle for justice, or equality, or rights – be it about women, or people with homosexual desires, or transgenderism.

Some try to be good by living simple lives, some by trying to provide for their families as much as possible. Some try to be good by not eating certain foods, some by not drinking certain drinks, or fighting for animal rights. Some try to be good by being polite and nice, some by doing the opposite and calling it being authentic.

Some try to be good by being religious, some by fighting to free society from all religions. We could easily come up with many more examples. The bottom-line is – all want to be good.

We can’t escape this deep need. And then we pick and choose or make up our own criteria and try to follow them. We try to live so that we would feel that we are good. But that’s not enough.

We need to go the other way as well. That is, we need to silence anything that makes us feel bad. Meaning, we need avoid hearing or encountering things that would reveal that we may not in fact be good.

We have invented these great sayings that “you are good enough as you are, don’t let anyone to tell you otherwise.” Really? Are we? Am I good enough as I am? So I don’t need to strive to overcome my anger issues, or my impatience?

So I don’t need to worry about substance abuse? So I don’t need to strive to be better husband and father and pastor? Does it mean that I can do whatever my ‘pure’ heart desires? By no means!

But we have done even more. We have accepted as the ultimate sacred rule of human interaction this wonderful principle, – whatever happens, whatever anyone does or fails to do, just don’t ... yes, just don’t judge!

For it may make someone ... to feel bad. What a disaster that would be! And do you think that Christians are somehow immune to this? No. We live in this world, in this society and we are influenced by it more than we realize.

I hear it again and again in different forms that our goal should be to make people feel ... good. Even Christians expect that when we come together in God’s presence the goal would be to make everyone feel good.

Ideal pastor would preach the way that no one ever gets offended, that no one is made to feel uncomfortable when their sins are mentioned. Okay, sometimes he could preach about the sins of those other people out there. That everyone is comforted, for the world is so bad and unfair to us, and that we get praised for all the good things that we have done.

I have heard people saying that God is love and that’s His job, His responsibility is to forgive us, and because we are sinners, He shouldn’t expect or demand anything from us. People who want to call themselves Christians tend to have really strange ideas.

There are these two handy illustrations, that help us to summarize two very different views on what the Church is. One is a museum. A museum of good people. A museum of people who don’t do bad things, whatever they are, and who most of time do only good things, and go to church and so on.

This is how society sometimes thinks about the Church. That’s fine. They don’t get it. But how tragic it is when Christians think this way. When we begin to think that we are good, that we are better than those others, because we come to services and participate in congregational activities and help people.

When we begin to think that we deserve God’s favour or deserve it more than those others, who don’t do the things that we do. If we happen to think this way, we need pray with fear and trembling that God is gracious to us and rescues us, for if we indeed think that way, then Jesus hasn’t come for us.

The other illustration is that of a hospital. We could say that this is a good Biblical illustration for as Jesus said: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”

Jesus hasn't come to those who are well, who think that they are good. He has come to call sinners. That's who we are. This illustration helps to see how terrible a sickness is this obsession with "not judging" and "feeling good".

What do you expect when you go to a hospital? What do you expect from your doctors? That they will help you to improve your health. I don't believe there are too many who go to doctors with the mindset of "don't you dare to make me realize that I am sick!" And how would we react, if our doctors were irresponsible and would hide our sickness from us until it's too late?

When we think about this hospital analogy, it helps to see how foolish the world can make Christians. We should be coming to our dear Lord, to our dear Great Physician and we should be genuinely asking for correct diagnoses.

What is wrong with me, dear Lord? Show me, please, what sins and idols make me sick and weak, and blind and foolish? Please, reveal to me my sins and my idols so that with your help I can strive to get better? And how blessed we are that we have this God given opportunity!

And how strange it sounds "I want to feel good, therefore don't tell me about my sickness, I don't want to hear about it!" Sometimes we deceive ourselves about our goodness, Christians are no exception. We don't want to think about our sins and we don't want to turn away from them. Then we are able to persuade ourselves that we are saved anyway.

Yes, Jesus has come to call sinners. But He has come to call them to turn away from their sins, and not to remain in them. Our sins won't rob us of God's forgiveness, but our unwillingness to admit them and to turn away from them can drive the Holy Spirit away.

Every time when we choose sin over Jesus, we drive the Holy Spirit away. Every time when we repent and return to Jesus, the Holy Spirit comes and dwells with us. We can't do both, wilfully choose to continue sinning and to receive the Holy Spirit. The words from Malachi are like a cold shower.

"The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come ... says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?" And the answer is – no one. There is no human being who could stand before the Holy God when He comes in His judgment.

We won't be able to say that "but we were worshipping regularly, and helping our neighbors, and doing the other stuff." When the holy God comes, when Jesus returns in His divine glory, no one will be able to stand before Him on their own. No one.

This is where Jesus Christ and God's grace comes is. This is why God speaks to us in His Word and reveals us our sins. For He wants to prepare us for His coming. This is why He sent prophets in the Old Testament times.

To warn His people to be serious about our sins. This is why He sent John the Baptism to prepare the way for Jesus. So that we would realize that we are totally, utterly, completely dependent upon God's grace and mercy.

This is why He sent His apostles. This is why we have the Bible, the written message from God. This is why He sent His Church into the world. To warn us. So that we wouldn't take God's precious gift of forgiveness lightly, as if we somehow deserved it.

That we would work out our salvation with fear and trembling (Phil 2:12), relying not on our goodness, but only on Jesus. For He has come to call sinners. And there is no sin that Jesus couldn't forgive.

There is no sin, that Jesus' blood couldn't purify. Just hand it over to Him. There is no guilt or shame that He couldn't turn into praise. Just don't try to hide it. He is willing to exchange our ugliest secrets to give us good conscience.

He cleanses us with His holy Word, He restores us with His Holy Sacrament, He renews our hearts with His Holy Spirit. He is in the business of delivering us from sin and death and devil, this is why He has come, and this is what He gladly does for you. He makes you good again. Very good. Accepted, embraced, and loved with the love divine.

But even the all-powerful God, even Jesus can't help those, who reject His offer, who are that good already that there is nothing to be judged in them. They are left on their own. "But who can stand..."

I pray today, that with the help of God we all could see how sick we are, and how much we need God's help. I pray that our Father and Jesus would make us all good again so that we can return to the place where we truly belong.

In God's presence, in the midst of His holy people, in the new garden of Eden, in the New Heavens and New Earth. This is God's promise to us, and this is our ultimate hope.

Amen.