

# "The Refiner"

Text: Malachi 3:1-7

May God grant us his grace and mercy, together with an ongoing understanding and appreciation of just how much and how desperately we need such undeserved love and forgiveness. Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians:

A couple of miles west of Bismarck is a sprawling behemoth currently known as the Tesoro Refinery. It's no secret what happens there. Through a complex process that mystifies most of us, crude oil from the Bakken is refined into gasoline, diesel fuel, jet fuel, heavy fuel oils and liquefied petroleum gas. The sludge that remains after all the good stuff is removed is rendered down, extruded into long strands, cut into equal lengths, packaged, and then sold in local convenience stores as black licorice. (And, yes, I just made that last part up – but isn't that kind of what black licorice tastes like?)

The point or focus here is the whole concept of refining. Interesting when you stop to think of it. "Refining" is actually very subjective. It involves removing something you *don't* want so that what you are left with is only what you *do* want. Sounds simple and obvious, but the interesting part is the subjectivity of the whole process. In other words, when something is refined to remove what one would call an impurity, that "impurity" can actually be even more valuable than the product the refiner is after. Gasoline, for example, was originally discarded by early petroleum refiners as an unwanted byproduct because all they were after was kerosene. An even better example: one of the ingredients in Coca-Cola comes from coca leaves. One of the "impurities" that is refined out of the 100 metric tons of coca leaves that Coca-Cola's lab imports every year (the only US company permitted by law to import coca leaves) is cocaine. That "impurity" that is refined out has a street value of about \$17,000,000 per year.

The application of the subjectivity of the refining process will become obvious to us when, on the basis of our text, we come to realize that God views human beings as the raw material that needs to be refined.

The text that will guide us in this application is found in the Old Testament Book of Malachi, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Chapter:

<sup>ESV</sup> **Malachi 3:1-7** *"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. <sup>2</sup> ¶ 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. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years. <sup>5</sup> ¶ "Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts. <sup>6</sup> ¶ "For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. <sup>7</sup> From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts. But you say, 'How shall we return?'"*

These are the precious words of our God. Acknowledging them to be not only objectively true for others, but *subjectively* true for each one of us, *individually*, so we pray, **"Sanctify us by your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth."** Amen.

Perhaps the single greatest misconception of human beings today is the arrogant and misguided idea that each of us, as our mothers give birth to us, represent pure "end products," rather than raw material that needs to be refined.

You see this dangerous misconception put into practice, for example, by parents who buy into the idea that children should be allowed to follow their own path, rather than be guided. They have been persuaded to view their beloved offspring as pure "final products," and that the single greatest responsibility that they have as parents is to prevent any outside forces from redirecting a child's natural inclinations.

Examples fill today's headlines. As a society we are currently wrestling with profoundly absurd questions like *"Which public bathroom should our children be allowed to use?"* This silliness is born of the modern idea that children should be allowed to determine their own gender, irrespective of their God-given genetics or plumbing. In other words,

there is a movement afoot to allow boys to use the girl's restroom if they choose to identify as girls, and vice versa.

Again, the basis for this foolishness is the notion that children are born perfect, and are only sullied by the outside influences of the society in which they live. The idea is that if we just allow children to make the decisions they believe are right, all will be well. The basic premise underlying this view is, again, that human beings are born as finished products with no need for any refining process.

God's Word, of course, says otherwise: Psalm 51:5: ***Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.*** Genesis 8:21: ***The intention of man's heart is evil from his youth.*** Romans 7:18: ***I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh.***

But we don't really even need God's Word to teach us just how ridiculous all of this is, do we? Experience and common sense alone suffice. What do you get when you allow a child to make all of his own decisions, like gender identification? You get one messed up adult. What do you get when you give a child everything he wants? You get a spoiled brat. Put all of those folks together and what would be the result? A thoroughly dysfunctional society that has absolutely no hope of any sort of stability, continuity, or even survival.

Yet no one here doubts any of this, so why do we even waste our time talking about it? Because while we all recognize how silly this is objectively (when we apply it to others) we actually have a much harder time recognizing the problem when we look at it subjectively; that is, when we actually apply it to ourselves.

Go back to our text for this morning. God the Holy Spirit, speaking through the Prophet Malachi, spoke to Israel of the need for refining and purification. Clearly the ***"messenger"*** is a prophecy of the coming of John the Baptist, the one who was to prepare the way for the promised Messiah. Yet how did he describe the coming and work of that Messiah? ***"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."*** The question we need to ask at this point is whether or not the people of that day recognized themselves as those who were in need of "refining." The answer is that they almost certainly did not. Do you remember how they got away with such ridiculous self-delusion? Do you recall the mechanism by which they were

able to feel good about themselves and about their standing with God? They dumbed down the law.

The Jews had come to believe that they earned their our salvation by keeping God's commandments. As misguided as that is, it's even more difficult to understand just how they could feel good about their salvation plan when they themselves weren't living up to it. They weren't keeping God's commandments. Not really. They had just reduced or narrowed God's commandments as much as necessary to qualify them as having kept them. For example, if they liked to gossip, then they reduced the demand of the 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment to telling lies under oath in court. If they hadn't actually done *that*, then they comforted themselves with the delusion that they had actually kept the Commandment.

In fact the people were so misguided and confused when John the Baptist finally arrived that they actually felt the need to ask him what they should and shouldn't do: Luke 3:10-14: ***And the crowds asked him, "What then shall we do?"*** <sup>11</sup> ***And he answered them, "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise."*** <sup>12</sup> ***Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?"*** <sup>13</sup> ***And he said to them, "Collect no more than you are authorized to do."*** <sup>14</sup> ***Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages."***

Things are no different today. Though God in our text plainly says ***"the LORD do not change,"*** still man imagines that what displeased God in the past no longer displeases him today. Still today unconverted man has a difficult time recognizing in himself any need for any refining process. More impossible still is his ability to distinguish between that which is a sinful, impure by-product that must be refined out and that which, in God's view, should be regarded as a desirable component of the pure finished product. Natural man *thinks* he knows, but his judgment is clouded by his natural desire for sin and evil. In other words, if something *feels* good and natural to man, it is virtually impossible for him to identify that characteristic as an impurity, or as something that is undesirable.

Yet here we don't talk about unbelievers to make us feel better about ourselves; we talk about them to learn something about ourselves. That means that this difficulty in identifying impurities is not just *their* problem, it is *ours*. In fact our problem is actually compounded by the

gospel itself, though that gospel is certainly not to blame. That compounding of the problem happens in this way: *It is the gospel that tells us that God now regards us as perfect because of what Jesus has done for us.* Jesus was the "refiner" described by Malachi in our text. He is the one who purified us by living an absolutely sinless life, and then by offering that life on the cross as the necessary payment for the sins of all mankind. The result is that he cancelled the power of sin to condemn us. Colossians 2:13-14: ***And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.*** When God now sees faith in Jesus Christ in our hearts, that faith is regarded by God as the equivalent of perfect obedience and sinlessness.

The problem comes when we allow that amazing declaration by God of sins forgiven to blind us to the impurities that still exist within us and therefore still threaten to destroy us. We are most certainly saved by God's undeserved love through faith in Jesus Christ, but that faith itself can be destroyed. Though now the sins of a *believer* have no power to condemn him, those sins – that evil within us – still has the power to destroy that faith by which alone we are saved. Our danger then is at the same time the same as, and different from, the unbeliever's. We stand now in God's grace, but that same God has issued this warning: ***"Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. <sup>12</sup> Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall."*** (1 Corinthians 10:11-12)

What evil inclinations exist within us? What is it within us that poses the greatest threat? That's a question each Christian must answer for himself, since only you can see clearly into your own heart. The good news here is that each of us can find our own answer to that question if we will but look honestly, comparing our own thoughts and actions to God's holy standard. Our text helps us here with a list of common sins. Note how that list progresses from the painfully obvious to the less obvious: ***"Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts."*** From this we learn that it isn't just the big sins that carry the power to destroy saving faith, it's also what we foolishly regard as small, inconsequential sins.

Finally, don't miss the love of our God that is obvious in all of this. God doesn't bring up the need for this refining process because he hates us. He does so because he loves us – because he wants us to spend eternity with him in his heaven. It was that love that moved him to sacrifice his own Son as our sin payment. That is the sacrifice by which we have been refined – purified – in his sight. It is that same love that moves our God to here warn of that lingering danger by which we can still destroy the salvation that is now ours through faith in Jesus Christ. God grant us the wisdom to recognize all that is evil in our hearts and the courage to refine it from our lives. To his glory. Amen.

## Scripture Readings

<sup>ESV</sup> **Philippians 1:2-11** Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>3</sup> ¶ I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, <sup>4</sup> always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, <sup>5</sup> because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. <sup>6</sup> And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. <sup>7</sup> It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. <sup>8</sup> For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. <sup>9</sup> And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, <sup>10</sup> so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, <sup>11</sup> filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Luke 3:1-9** In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, <sup>2</sup> during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. <sup>3</sup> And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>4</sup> As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.' <sup>5</sup> Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, <sup>6</sup> and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'" <sup>7</sup> ¶ He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup> Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. <sup>9</sup> Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

# ST. PAUL EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

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**The Second Sunday in Advent – December 6, 2015**

## The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

## The Opening Hymn – 702 (Brown Hymnal)

"As Angels Joyed with One Accord"

## The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

## The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

**The First Lesson** (Philippians 1:2-11) Paul here expresses his delight with the Christians in and around Philippi. Yet notice that even as he praises and builds them up, he also points out to them the ongoing need for Christian growth. Since faith is never a static thing (it is either diminishing or growing stronger) our Lord obviously wants to see growth and advancement in all of his children, both then and now. Our God desires not just our survival; he wants strong, confident, highly educated Christians that advance his kingdom.

## The Psalm of the Day – Psalm 24 (Page 25)

**The Second Lesson:** (Luke 3:1-9) Evidently when John the Baptist was preparing the way for Jesus, he encountered some who came to be baptized by him as some sort of fad or trend. His message to them, as to us, is that the true Christian faith is neither artificial nor superficial. In other words, true faith changes the sinner's heart, resulting in actions that are in keeping with that change. That is why no one who claims to love Christ can ever be comfortable with sin.

## The Confession of Faith -

The Apostolic Creed – page 15 (Brown Hymnal)

## The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 73 (Verses 1-4) Third Tune (Red Hymnal)

"Lift Up Your Heads Ye Might Gates"

## The Sermon – Text: Malachi 3:1-7 (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

**"The Refiner"**

## The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

## The Post-Sermon Hymn – 95 (Verses 1-4) (Red Hymnal)

"Savior of the Nations Come"

## The Offering (Hymn 89 Verses 1 & 5)

## The Prayer followed by the Lord's Prayer

## The Benediction

## The Closing Hymn -73 (Verse 5) Third Tune (Red Hymnal)

"Lift Up Your Heads Ye Might Gates"

## Silent Prayer

**Welcome!** - We warmly welcome any visitors who might be with us this morning and invite you to join us every Sunday at this time. St. Paul is a congregation in fellowship with the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) – a conservative Lutheran synod with churches and missions throughout the United States, as well as Canada, India, and Africa. We are glad you are here. Thank you for letting us share the Word of God with you. Please record your visit in our Guest Book, and come again!

## Attendance - Last Sunday (53) Average (49) Wednesday (24)

### This Week at St. Paul:

<b>Today</b>	<b>-9:00 a.m.</b>	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	<b>-10:00 a.m.</b>	– Sunday Worship Service
	<b>-11:00 a.m.</b>	– Coffee/Fellowship Time
	<b>-11:15 a.m.</b>	– Choir Practice
	<b>-11:30 a.m.</b>	– Church Council Meeting
<b>Wednesday</b>	<b>-5:45 p.m.</b>	– Confirmation Class
	<b>-7:00 p.m.</b>	– Midweek Advent Service
<b>Next Sunday</b>	<b>-9:00 a.m.</b>	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	<b>-10:00 a.m.</b>	– Sunday Worship w/communion
	<b>-11:30 a.m.</b>	– Fellowship Meal
	<b>-12:00 p.m.</b>	– Voters' and WF Meetings

**CLC News** – In addition to Robert List, Professor John Pfeiffer and Pastors Walter Schaller and Vance Fossum have also announced their upcoming retirements from the fulltime public ministry. Many other seasoned pastors in the Synod are nearing the age of retirement, which underscores the need for our young men to consider that critical vocation as their life's work.

**Christmas Party** – Thanks again to those who worked to make the Annual Christmas party such an enjoyable event.

**Meetings** – The Church Council is scheduled to meet this morning and both the Annual Voters' Meeting and Women's Fellowship Meeting are scheduled for next Sunday. Please also remember the fellowship meal scheduled for next Sunday.

**Immanuel Christmas Events** - The annual piano/organ recital is scheduled for Sunday., Dec. 13, 3 pm, at the ILC field house. The highlight of the music department will be the Christmas concert at Messiah Lutheran Church in Eau Claire on Fri., Dec. 18, 7:30 pm – which also marks the end of the first semester. This concert will include the flute choir, band, mass choir, and tour choir. The students resume classes on Jan. 11.