

“I The Lord Do Not Change”

In the name of him who is the same yesterday, today, and forever; dear friends in Christ: As we approach the end of the calendar year it grows increasingly darker and colder. The days are shorter, the nights are longer, and the temperature plummets to freezing and below. The landscape once so beautifully green, bright, and full of life turns the sickly shades and shadows of death. It happens every year.

And it is a solemn reminder to us of the greater reality: the timeless truth that as we approach the end of this age the minds of humans are growing increasingly darker and the love of their hearts is turning cold. All around us we see the collapse of formerly cherished moral values. Disgraceful actions and behaviors that used to be universally condemned are considered perfectly acceptable today. It's like there's been a pole reversal on people's moral compasses. It's not just that they don't know which way is right, it's that they purposely rush headlong in the wrong direction, delighting in calling evil good and good evil, and insisting that others join them in doing the same. If this nation and the world at large are currently experiencing an economic downturn, even greater is the spiritual recession that's underway. We are going morally bankrupt. Our sin debt rises exponentially faster than the national debt. And sadly, unlike the temperature and light conditions, which will surely improve with the coming of spring, there is no promise of spring or recovery for the human heart. Quite the contrary: we've been told to expect things to get worse as the end draws near.

It would be nice if the Christian Church would stand out as a beacon of light in the gathering gloom; but for the most part that's not the case. Instead we see the majority of mainline denominations eagerly embracing the erring ways of the world. As our culture slouches towards Gomorrah, these churches without backbones slump and slither with it, telling sinners exactly what they want to hear: “That in the past the church misunderstood these things, that those passages of Scripture that condemn this or that behavior have been improperly applied, and that now we understand these issues so much better than did the ancient prophets and apostles who wrote the Bible. But we should cut them some slack. They lived a long time ago. What could they possibly know? We're so much more enlightened now.” Right.

And don't image for a moment that we who by God's grace are part of a church that still takes the Holy Scriptures seriously aren't affected by all this. As the culture and society drift into darkness, whether we like it or not we are drifting with them – at least to some degree. Who can deny that the kinds of movies we see and the shows we watch on television, the books and articles we read, the messages that get passed around on the internet that we receive and forward, the topics of our day to day conversations—a lot of it is the sort of filth that we would have been ashamed of not too long ago. Now we don't twice about it. Why is that? The answer is because we've been compromised. We've been seduced. Our hearts are getting darker too. And even when we have objections, we feel pressure to remain silent and just go with the flow. We don't want to people to think we're not with it or that we're some kind of religious fanatics.

On the flip side, there's an even worse danger. The declining morality of the world makes us feel better about ourselves. There's a part of us that likes the fact that the world is getting so dark. When other people are behaving badly it makes us look so much better by comparison – at least in our own eyes. “Would you look at what those awful people are doing?

Thank God I would never do that!" Where have I heard that before? Oh, I remember: it was the Pharisee who prayed, "Lord, I thank you that I am not like other men, sinners like this tax collector." How easy it is to point the accusing finger at others and completely forget that the same law that condemns them condemns us too.

The Scripture is clear: there is none righteous; no, not one. And it doesn't make any difference to what dark depths the standards of this world sink. We aren't going to be judged by the world's standards. We're going to be judged by the Lord according to his standards: his perfect, holy, and absolute standards that never change. This is the message that John the Baptist came to proclaim to the people of his time. And through the ministry of the church the thundering voice of John is still heard today. "Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight." Make sure you personally are ready to receive him.

Today's Old Testament lesson from Malachi foretells John's coming and his mission to get things ready for the Lord's arrival. In military terms, John is the heavy artillery barrage that precedes the major offensive. He's to knock down the strongholds, clear away the obstacles, and reduce the opposition to a terrified, shell-shocked, and reeling rabble who are eager to throw down their arms and surrender at the first available opportunity.

"Behold I send my messenger ... the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold he is coming, says the Lord of angelic armies. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?" The clear implication is that no one can. His job is to lay us all in the dust. "He is like a refiner's fire and a fuller's soap." Those are some powerful images. The refiner we can understand pretty well. In order to extract pure silver from the ore that contains it, it has to be heated to incredibly high temperatures. Then the silver becomes liquid. When it does, the impurities, which tend to be lighter than silver because it's a comparatively heavy metal, come floating to the top. Then they can be skimmed off leaving only the pure silver behind.

Fuller's soap, on the other hand, is a less familiar image to most of us; but it's a good one too. In ancient times, folks did most of their laundry in washtubs with homemade soap derived from animal fats and potash, pretty much like they did until the dawn of washing machines and laundry detergent. Ah, but for ceremonial occasions, when you wanted to get your robes their whitest white, you took them to a professional cleaner called a fuller. He'd soak your robe in a special, highly caustic lye soap that you probably wouldn't want to use at home. And then he'd pound your robe with a pair of fuller's hammers – big wooden mallets – in order to work the soap between every fiber of the cloth so that it came out spotless and bright white.

Both of these images speak to the same idea: the use of extraordinary measures, high heat, caustic chemicals, and violent, brute force to search out and strip away every trace of sin from the hearts of God's people. It's the only way we'll be able to receive the Lord when he comes; because if you think John was hard on sin, he doesn't hold a candle to the Lord himself who demands of us nothing short of absolute perfection. No one with even the slightest trace of sin can stand before the Lord when he comes.

Our text goes on to list some of the sins the Lord finds especially vexing. He says, "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." And, of course, our first response is to think, "But I don't do any of those things." No? Really?

It's true, most of us don't practice overt sorcery, casting spells, telling fortunes, and what not; but have you ever carried a good luck charm or a lucky coin? Or followed any superstitious rituals before engaging in certain tasks? Are there certain numbers or signs you feel are favorable or unlucky for you? If so, you're guilty of the sin of sorcery. Even some of our most cherished religious practices can fall under the sin of sorcery if we think that by doing them we will somehow be rewarded or that we'll be punished if we fail to do them.

With this in view, it's hardly necessary to mention adultery. We know that Jesus said that if a man even looks at a woman lustfully, he's already committed this sin. In our sex-saturated society, I don't know how anyone can avoid it. You can't even stand at the checkout of the grocery store without being exposed to near pornographic images. And this is to say nothing of what's in commercials, or beckoning on the internet, or coming at us through any number of other mediums.

Well, what about swearing falsely? Maybe you think you don't do that. Are you sure? If you're confirmed member of the church, you took a sacred oath to "conform all your life to the divine Word, to be faithful in the use of God's Word and Sacraments, and in faith, word, and action to remain true to God, Father, Son, and Spirit, even to death". Have you always done that? If you're married, you took a sacred vow to always "love, comfort, honor, cherish, and keep your spouse – forsaking all others" – until one of you dies. Have you ever failed, even for a moment, to do any of that? If you are an officer of this church, you took a sacred oath to see to the temporal affairs of the church, to provide proper support for its called workers, to assist in caring for the poor and sick, in cultivating harmony among the members, in promoting the welfare of the congregation, and in furthering the kingdom of Christ here and throughout the world. You further promised to be a living model for the rest of the congregation of the pattern of good works and devotion that Christians ought to display. How are you doing? And this is only to speak of the sacred oaths some of us have taken. Christ our Lord commands us to be honest and truthful in all of our communication with others. Have you ever told a lie to protect yourself or to give you some advantage however small? If so, you're guilty of false swearing.

But surely someone will say, "At least I don't oppress workers in their wages, the widows and fatherless, and so on. You can't convict me of that." I'm not so sure. A week or two ago there was a big fire in a garment factory in Bangladesh. Maybe you heard about it. Well over 100 workers were killed because it was an unsafe sweat-shop eight floors high but without any fire escapes. I don't need to tell you that the people who work in such places earn wages that are below subsistence levels; but they have no choice. It's the only work available. For them it's that or starve. But if you were to go through your closets, you'd probably find that half or more of the clothes you own were made in such places. Same for your electronic devices: your iPads, iPods, and cell phones. A lot of the food on your table is harvested by workers who are mistreated and poorly paid. Just because you don't see these people doesn't mean that you aren't part of the machine that is taking advantage of them. You can call it other things like bargain hunting, looking for a deal, and making frugal decisions with your money; but it doesn't change the awful truth or make life any better those who are being oppressed.

And this brings me to the worse offense of all on the list – the last one mentioned. It's the sin of having no fear of the Lord. It happens when, in our minds, we imagine that the Lord is rather like an overly indulgent grandparent who tells mom and dad not to be so hard their kids. He's the sort of Santa Claus who never really puts coal in anyone's stocking, no matter how naughty they've been. He just winks at what we suppose to be our minor offenses; but when all is said and done, he'll let us get away with just about anything. He loves us so much we never have to worry about suffering the consequences of our actions.

That God does not exist. And if you believe he does, then you don't know the Lord at all. It certainly isn't how the Lord describes himself in Holy Scripture. He says that he is a consuming fire, full of wrath and fury against those who do evil. Jesus said don't fear those who can destroy your body. Rather fear the one who can destroy both your body and soul in hell. My friends, if we are ever to truly know and understand the Lord, we've got to come to grips with just how much he despises what we hold to be even the most insignificant sin – and not just the sin, but the sinners themselves. That old canard about how God hates sin but loves sinners is a lie of the devil. I know because hell will not be full of sins. It will be full of sinners upon whom the wrath – and yes, the hatred of God – will rest forever. If you are a sinner, and I think we've established that you are, that had better frighten you. If it doesn't, then you cannot be saved. Although the world's standards are slackening, and our sinful natures want to believe that our own offenses aren't very serious, the Lord whose unchanging standard is absolute perfection sees things differently. Before him you cannot stand. You will be condemned.

And maybe you want to ask, "But wait, doesn't the Lord still love me? Doesn't he want to save me?" The answer is yes. Just as the Lord's law is unchanging, so is his steadfast love. And that's precisely why he sent John the Baptizer and his powerful message full of dire warnings. That's why he continues to send these dire warnings today: so that you will tremble before the Lord, fear his righteous wrath over your sin, and be in utter despair of being able to save yourself from your lost condition. He's got to knock you down. He's got to bring you to your knees. You see, the Lord can't save you if you are a smug sinner who doesn't think you have anything to worry about. He can only save you if you are a sinner who rightfully fears his wrath and you repent of your sins.

Then and only then can he direct your attention away from yourself and your sin to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world – who takes away *your* sin by bearing it to the cross and there suffering the righteous wrath, judgment, and hatred of God in your place. If you want to know how the Lord feels about your sin, you have only to look at the whipped, pain wracked, writhing body of the Lord Jesus nailed to the tree. That's how unchanging is the perfect standard of his holy law that demands that sinners be driven from his presence and punished. But likewise, if you want to know how deep is the Lord's unchanging and steadfast love for those who fear him, you have only to look in the same place – for Jesus the God-Man bore the punishment for you.

The Lord doesn't change. Both his law and his love endure forever. But by his grace, may his law and his love change us, so that we repent of our sins and receive with joy and thanksgiving the forgiveness he purchased for us at so great a price. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!