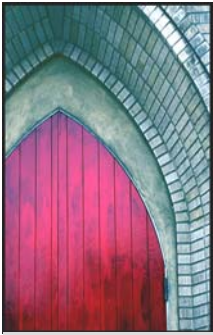


TURNING THE HEARTS OF CHILDREN AND FATHERS

SCRIPTURE TEXT:

MALACHI 4:4-6 (ESV)



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FATHER'S DAY

Oak Hills
Presbyterian Church,
Overland Park,
Kansas

Happy Father's Day:

Today is Father's Day, and my hope in this time we have is to honor our fathers together. Not only is it right to honor our parents, we're commanded to in the 10 Commandments. Just so we're clear, there's not one command from God that is given arbitrarily. His **EVERY** command is meant to bind our hearts to the pattern He intended for our lives as His children. So as I now extend a very warm Happy Father's Day, it is under the conviction that this is more than a salutation. It's also an act of honoring the Living God, the Maker of and the Ultimate **FATHER**.

Malachi - The Great Comma:

Today we will turn to the last verses of the last book of the Old Testament, Malachi. Malachi stands as the great comma of Scripture, not merely because it is the last book of the Old Testament, but also because it does very much leave the audience of the book lingering, waiting for the promised finish—the coming of the Messiah. Malachi was likely written, like Ezra and Nehemiah, around 430BC. The people of Israel a century earlier had been carried off to foreign lands, but since then many had returned and begun the process of rebuilding.

As one might imagine, these were discouraged, doubtful and disillusioned people. They were a people of a rich heritage—called by God to be His people—a Covenant God Himself cut with Abraham, their forefather. But they were far removed from that now, and from the promises of the earlier prophets. Their forefathers had disobeyed God, and God had allowed them to be carried off into exile, taking them from their most tangible artifact of that covenant with God—the Promised Land.

These sons and daughters of the Exile stood in the smoldering heap of what was once crowned with Glory, while their faith, like their land, had disintegrated. Though they certainly had bitterness and cynicism in their hearts, it is their doubt and discouragement God addresses through His messenger, Malachi—making this a great book for anyone struggling with doubt. Malachi begins with this simple yet universe altering statement of fact from God; **"I HAVE LOVED YOU!"**^(1:2)

Their doubt was born out of the fear that they had been **disowned** by God. And God, in His abounding mercy, begins by insisting they remain the object of His affection. He then calls them to return to pinning their hopes on His Covenant faithfulness, and to return to obedience in response to that Covenant. He then addresses specific areas where their disintegration of faith has led to the disintegration of other things, among them, the relationships between children and fathers. It is on this point that the Old Testament draws to a close, leaving us, like Malachi's audience, needing what comes after the comma that is Malachi. Let's read those last verses.

Malachi 4:4-6

"Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel. ⁵"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. ⁶And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction."

Honoring My Dad:

Back around 1954, in Noblesville, Indiana, there was a little boy on a playground standing next to a teeter-totter, while the child who used to sit on the other end lay on the ground crying. It was an accident, but a parent nearby began to chastise the boy for "cherry bumping" the other child off the teeter-totter. The accused boy went over to his mother who stood nearby and began to cry, reaching up for her to comfort him. She looked away, ignoring him, as he tried to climb into her arms. Dad told me, *"On that day, I think my heart died."* It wasn't just that my grandmother wouldn't console him. It was the reason she gave, *"I didn't hold you because the other boy who was crying didn't have a mom there to hold him, so it wouldn't have been fair."* Dad was 5.

This event describes well the tone of the home my Dad grew up in. Let me just say it was hard. He grew up a child of exile—removed from the life he was meant for through the sins of the generation before. Children of exile grow up to become adults of exile. No one taught him how to be a Dad. His father was absent from the home. So when my brother and I were kids, Dad struggled to connect with us, even after he came to faith when I was five. He has invited me to tell you that he did not consider himself a very good dad when we were young.

We could go into all the psychology of why this was, but perhaps the best way to describe what we really needed is to borrow the wording from our text—for God to turn a father's heart toward his children and the children's hearts toward their father. And that can be a painful wait, especially if you don't even realize that this is what you're waiting for, much less craving. But in the spring of 1992, as I sat in my dorm room at Taylor University, the Lord turned my Dad's heart toward his children and had in mind to turn my heart toward Dad. The Maker and Sustainer of all creation had spoken in a fresh way to my dad's heart the words He spoke to the people in Malachi, **"I HAVE LOVED YOU!"** And my Dad, the bravest man I know, called to tell me the same thing, and to apologize for doing it poorly.

I cannot begin to tell you how much healing came through that conversation. What I can say is that the Lord has restored to my dad and me the years the locusts had eaten. And I want to honor my Dad for what the Lord has done, and cry out, *"Oh Lord, turn my heart toward my children, and their hearts toward me."* I see in these verses that God **MEANS** to do this very thing—not just arbitrarily, but upon the unfailing foundation He has set under His people in the form of His covenant.

I Will Send You Elijah:

God is addressing a doubting people, and He says in vs. 4, “Remember the Law of Moses.” Why? Well, in part, they had forgotten it through the travail of exile. But another reason is one that stands as immeasurably relevant still today—it is in the Law of Moses—Genesis to Deuteronomy—where the people of God receive the assurance that they **BELONG** to God, “I will be your God and you will be my people for the generations to come.” (Gen 17:7, 19, Ex 6:7) God calls the discouraged and doubtful to remember this. Brothers and sisters, be students of the Book!

God calls them to remember the Law, and then says something **FILLED** with hope, “I will send you Elijah.” Who exactly is Elijah? In the Old Testament, when Elijah the prophet was taken up into heaven, the Lord said he would return. In the New Testament, John the Baptist was the 2nd Elijah. (Mt 11:14, Mk 9:12, Lk 1:17) What did John proclaim? Baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin (Mk 1:4) Why is this reference to John the Baptist so filled with hope for us today? Two reasons:

FIRST, the call to repent for the forgiveness of sin is a loud statement that the Covenant stands! No matter how far removed we feel from God, it is His Word alone that upholds the **EVERLASTINGNESS** of His covenant. For Malachi to declare, “Yes, the Covenant is alive and you must be mindful of it because you are **other party** God made the covenant with,” is to plead with our hearts to believe that we are **NOT**, in any way, disowned. John cries out, “You **remain** the people of God.”

The **SECOND** reason this reference is filled with hope is because of the One whose coming John the Baptist was heralding—Jesus Christ. And isn’t it strange that Malachi would say that the salvation John would speak of would turn the hearts of fathers toward their children and the hearts of children toward their fathers! Why do you suppose Malachi says this, of all the results of the coming of Jesus he could have alluded to? I think the reason is because one of the most devastating effects of sin is the ruin it has leveled against God’s design for the family.

When God created man, He also created the world in which man was to live. Seeing it was not good for man to be alone, God also created woman and instituted marriage. Then He gave the man and the woman the charge to fill the earth with children. Built into God’s created order was the home. From the beginning, the hearts of fathers and children were meant to be knit together. Parents were created to love their children.

God calls Himself our Father, as though it is one of the most affectionate and secure titles He could give so that we might understand the **STRENGTH** of His devotion to us. But as is often the case in a fallen world, we often long for God’s design most when we are confronted with its absence in our lives, and have instead a prevailing sense that things are messed up. So many of us, like those in Malachi’s day, ache over the ruin that is the family—the prodigal children, the emotionally or physically absent fathers, the years that pass without ever feeling like you truly know your own dad... or your son... or your daughter.

The Lord says in Malachi, “This I will redeem. I will turn the hearts of fathers toward their children and the hearts of children toward their fathers.” This He means to heal through the awesome scope of the saving power of the work of His Son Jesus, Whom He has sent to live and die in our place. There is not one corner of creation He does not mean to restore, even those we may suspect are simply beyond hope. They are not.

When God declares He will turn the hearts of fathers toward their children and the hearts of children toward their fathers, I am impressed by the immensity of this promise. How glorious that God’s promise is not that He would change those around me, but that He would change **ME!** This is a much better deal! When I just consider what I need Him to do in me as a young dad, I am reminded again that the scope of His redeeming grace is set like a laser on the heart of the problem—my heart! And thank God for this, because the goal in life is not to bend the wills of those around me into what my dark heart requires, but to make my heart love my wife, delight in my children and honor my parents. None of this will happen unless the Lord turns my heart—the very thing He promises to do!

A Father’s Heart, A Child’s Heart:

In closing, I wanted to take just a moment to honor the dads here, and to lean together on the promise that God means to change our hearts. Many here are fathers because the Lord has given you and your wife children. Treasure these children and never stop asking the Lord to turn your heart toward them. Some of you are adoptive fathers. Men, know that you honor the Lord with your very lives. And know too that you have been given a very special honor by God in that it is through adoption that God Himself speaks of His own Fatherhood with us, His children. Your very life is a proclamation of the Gospel this world needs desperately to hear. May the Lord be your strength and your song, and may your children be your crown.

For some, Father’s Day means grief. Some of you have recently buried your own fathers. And you’ve been thinking about the part of the verse that says God will turn the hearts of children toward their fathers—and you wonder if you’re up for that. For others, the Lord has turned your hearts toward children you have not been able to keep. Some of you have buried your babies—a grief no one should ever have to know. Others of you have miscarried—a lonely burden that is very difficult to share. Grieving dads and moms, do not think this verse is not for you. It is a profound grace that God does not cause our hearts to forget our children, but to turn toward them. May God turn your hearts toward your children today, and may the memory of them be for you a healthy homesickness for heaven. The last thing the Lord said in Scripture prior to the coming of His son Jesus who was to die, was that He would restore fathers to their children. May you cling to this hope!

Others of you have the heart of a father but have been unable to conceive—a frustration that makes the strongest of faith question God. Others still have not yet found a mate to have children with, but you have a father’s heart and you long for children. From our text today we are reminded again that God has not forgotten us. He says to His people, “I have loved you.”

Some of you are fathers by providence. The Lord has brought the fatherless to your door for the divine purpose that you might be, in some way, a father to them. And some of you are spiritual fathers. The Lord has been pleased to use you to lead others to Christ, and to disciple them in their walk with the Lord. To you and all the fathers here today, may the Lord give you more than all you ask or imagine. May He saturate your relationships with grace and mercy. May your home be a place of healing and laughter and reverence for the Lord. Here in the presence of God we honor you. And by doing so, my prayer is that together we have honored our Heavenly Father, to Whom belongs all honor, glory, majesty and power forever and ever.