

12-8-24

My Christmas Wish List

Malachi 1:11

We're in the thick of it now. The turkey's been cooked, Black Friday and Cyber Monday probably cooked our credit cards, and even the Holly Day Parade is in our rearview mirror. Now we're listening to Christmas carols 24/7.

They say Christmas is for children. With four kids still at home, I can totally understand why. As soon as thanksgiving's over, the questions from my youngest seem to multiply:

So, how many days left before Christmas?

Do you know what I want for Christmas?

Pastors also wrestle with questions we ask ourselves as Christmas approaches.

It's the time of year where we typically see an uptick in church attendance and realize we've been given a golden opportunity to share God's message with a wider audience, so we don't want to squander it, so we ask a most pertinent question:

How do I take the age-old story of Christ's birth – the story of how God became man – the story of how the divine took on human form – and tell it in a fresh way so that people will follow him on a deeper level?

Asking this question is by no means finding fault in the story. The Nativity story, as amazing as it is, is historically accurate and is by far the greatest story ever told.

The only comparable one is the continuation of this one – when Christ rose from the dead to prove his victory over death.

No, the difficulty in communicating the Gospel rests in the fact that God has chosen us – broken and weak human beings to be both the recipients and messengers of His Good News. And when I talk about weakness, I'm not necessarily referring to mental or physical weakness, but spiritual – most notably our lack of faith.

Each of us needs faith to believe God's message of salvation.

Each of us needs faith to accept the message of redemption and sanctification.

We all need faith to testify to the Good News that has changed our eternal destiny.

The bottom line is that there is no aspect of the Christian life that we can realize or experience in the absence of faith. We are completely in need of God's help.

Without faith in Christ, we remain outside the reality of eternal salvation.

But God, entrusting us to carry his message of hope and love?

This sounds like bad news for God!

For some strange reason, God has chosen to hitch his wagon to ours – weak people who are often more concerned with keeping our own schedule than helping our neighbor.

In his sovereign wisdom, God's decided that we should be co-laborers with him, telling forth His story and reflecting his glory.

What could he possibly have been thinking?

God choosing us to be on his team is a mystery indeed, but there's no mystery in the final outcome. Paul wrote in Philippians 1:6, *"He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."*

And when that day is, even the son of God does not know for Jesus said in Matthew 24:36, *"No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the son, but only the father."*

But while we wait for that great and glorious day, we are to be about the Lord's business: This is clear from Christ words in John 9:4 when he said, *"As long as it is day, we must do the work of Him who sent me. Night is coming when no one can work."* and the good news is that in our weakness, God will be our strength *as we work* for him.

So, with this in mind, do you know what your pastor wants for Christmas?

A new book of sermon illustrations perhaps? No, something much better than that. In fact I have four things on my Christmas list and they're for you as much as they're for me.

1 I want us to commit to first things first. In other words, the number 1 priority of our church must be to *"set our hearts to honor God's name"*, just like it says in Malachi 2: 1- 2. *"And now this admonition is for you O priests, if you do not listen and if you do not set your heart to honor my name, says the Lord almighty, I will send a curse upon you, and will curse your blessings. Yes, I've already cursed them, because you have not set your heart to honor me."*

To set one's heart means to make a decision and follow through on that decision no matter the cost. And it's not only that we seek to not break our commitment, but also that we find ways to strengthen and reinforce our commitment.

In other words, it's not enough just to try to *not* do something for fear it will reflect poorly on our character, we must strive to do things that will bolster and enhance our initial commitment.

This is the difference between surviving and thriving.

A survival mentality of Christianity is weak and fruitless and is only interested in self-preservation.

But a thriving mentality is one that dares to put ourselves out there in a way where the world witnesses God's action and activity.

Why should we make such a commitment to honor God?

For at least two reasons:

First, God's name is great and is worthy of all our honor and praise. We see this truth spelled out in Malachi 1:5: *"Great is the Lord – even beyond the borders of Israel",*

and again in 1:11: *"My name will be great among the nations from the rising to the setting of the sun. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to my name, because my name will be great among the nations, says the Lord Almighty."*

So, when we make a commitment to honor God, we never have to question whether it's right or wrong. We are always assured that it is the right thing to do.

Second, our commitment to honor God above all things is the root of all meaningful relationships.

This is clearly seen in Malachi's scathing report against the Hebrews as he describes their inability to be faithful to one another: Malachi asks accusingly in 2:10, *"Why do you profane the covenant of our fathers by breaking faith with one another?"*

To say it in another way, breaking faith with one another means to commit treachery toward God, and the Israelites broke faith in the worst way. They desecrated and destroyed the marriage covenant by divorcing and remarrying outside their faith.

When our relationship with God goes awry, its consequences will be felt the greatest in our closest human relationships.

For most of us, that will be our relationship with our spouse. They know us best and we will not be able to hide our lack of peace and discontent from them.

Do you desire a healthy and loving marriage?

Then heed the Lord's word of Malachi 2:15: *"Has not the Lord made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his... So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth."*

So, what if you're not married or your children are all grown up or maybe you have children but have never been married or you're divorced?

There is a wide spectrum of situations one can find himself in, but God's principle for his creation to honor him above all things

encompasses them all: Whatever situation you find yourself in, take the necessary steps to align yourself with God's will.

This brings honor to the Lord.

You're single? Honor God by saving yourself for marriage.

Are you living with someone outside the marriage covenant?

Then either get married or go your separate ways.

Are you married but are unfaithful within the marriage covenant?

Then confession and repentance are the orders of the day.

The Bible says that if we continue to live in sin, ignoring God's laws, then he will not hear our prayers. Malachi 2: 13 – 14: *"You weep and wail because he no longer pays attention to your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. You ask why. It is because the Lord is acting as a witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you've broken faith with her."*

Sure, God is speaking about literal divorce here, but he's also referring to any relationship that is outside his will that's bringing dishonor to his name.

So, my first Christmas wish is having each of us examine our lives and see where we've fallen down on our commitment to God and ask God to change this – more importantly to change us on the inside which has brought this sin to bear.

The second item on my Christmas wish list is that we give our best to God.

In 1:14 Malachi writes, *“Cursed is the cheat who has an acceptable male in his flock and vows to give it, but then sacrifices a blemished animal to the Lord. For I am a great king says the Lord Almighty, and my name is to be feared among the nations.”*

Do we really want to be called cheaters? This is so humiliating.

God deserves our best, because he is the best.

He’s our great king.

But we’re often content to give him our seconds. Is it because we want the best for ourselves? Perhaps, but it probably has more to do with control.

When things are out of our control, we have this sinking feeling that something will be wasted or spoiled. We just don’t trust God or others with our stuff, so we protect it and hoard it and watch it die in our hands.

Either we trust God to take care of our needs or we don’t. If not, then our natural inclination is to withhold from him, and watch the gifts he gives us leak through our hands like water.

Third, I wish that we would go out on a limb for God.

Let’s live outside the borders of our human strength – venture outside our comfort zone. This is where we live by faith.

This is where God’s glory, love, and grace are most clearly recognized.

In 3:8, the prophet accuses the Israelites of robbing God by not tithing writing, *“You are under a curse, the whole nation of you because you*

are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse so that there may be food in my house.

Test me in this, says the Lord almighty and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.”

Certainly God is talking about our financial obligations so the work of the ministry can be accomplished, but this is only a small aspect of a broader biblical principle namely that we rob God when we choose to live without faith.

In reality, we're not stealing money from God – He doesn't need or want our money.

What he needs or what he desires from us is that he might use us to bring glory to his name. And so, when choose to live independent of him and fail to acknowledge him, then yes, in a sense we're stealing from him, because we're not giving credit where credit is due.

We have essentially claimed God's work as our own, and this is stealing.

God's people, first and foremost, are to be people of faith, because God said that by faith you shall know me, and God's mission for his people, should we choose to accept it, is that we bring glory and honor to the One we've come to know.

The implications are easy to decipher. When we don't live by faith, we cease giving glory to his name. When we live by faith, we glorify him.

Too often we Christians cower in the shelter of our own safety zone.

God will not use us here because we are not exercising the faith He has given us.

What are we going to do to test God's promise here in Malachi 3:10?

What is this church, as a corporate body of believers going to do to *"test me in this and see if I will not throw open the flood gates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it"*?

Finally, the fourth item on my Christmas wish list is that we'd stand in the gap with Christ – that we would sense the great urgency in our day and be motivated by it by sharing the Good News.

Chapter 4 of Malachi warns us of the great and dreadful day of God's judgment where the wicked will be trampled under feet, but before this happens, God promises to send his prophet Elijah to make one more appeal for sinners to repent and turn to the Lord by faith.

Jesus says that John the Baptist came in the spirit of Elijah, and we too as Christ's children have been given this same spirit.

We too have been commissioned to help turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers.

So this is my pastor's Christmas wish list:

- 1 Set your heart to honor God. Make a conscientious decision to follow God, even if it means suffering some pain, ridicule, heartache or uncertainty. These will be temporary inconveniences compared to our eternal reward.

- 2 Decide to give your best to God, knowing and believing that your best is better left in God's hands than our own. He sees everything. We can't even see around the next corner.
- 3 Go out on a limb for God in some way. This is where our faith is activated and God is honored, because God sees our dependence on Him.
- 4 Number 4 relates closely to #3: Stand in the gap with Christ so many more will see the light and be saved. Be the connection that closes the circuit.

These are the gifts that will keep on giving ... glory and honor to our Lord, Savior, and King.

Are they cheap and inexpensive gifts?

Hardly, but they are the most satisfying and the most rewarding ones.

God never called us to an easy life. He called us to be authentic people of faith so that in the end His honor and glory will be our greatest happiness and satisfaction and peace and joy. Amen.