

Malachi 4:5-6 “A Father’s Day Charge: Turning the Hearts of Fathers and Their Children”***

Main Idea: In the final two verses of the Old Testament, Malachi 4:5-6, God reveals the family’s greatest problem and greatest need, and what He has done about it.

- I. God reveals the family’s greatest problem.
 - A. Fathers have a heart problem.
 1. Their hearts need to be turned.
 2. Their hearts are preoccupied with the wrong things.
 - B. Children have a heart problem.
 1. Their hearts need to be turned as well.
 2. Their hearts are preoccupied with the wrong things.
- II. God reveals the family’s greatest need, which is His grace.
 - A. In His grace, God predicted He would send a special man.
 - B. In His grace, God predicted He would use that man to turn hearts.
 - C. In His grace, God did what He predicted (Luke 1:17).
 1. John preached repentance (Luke 3:1-14).
 2. John preached that people need the Christ (Luke 3:15-18).

Make It Personal: What does God want us to know on Father’s Day?

1. We need to give attention to our hearts.
2. We need to give attention to our families.
3. We need to give attention to His provisions of grace.
4. We need to give our full attention to the Christ.

I’ve been praying about what the Lord would have me say for this Father’s Day message, and He directed my attention to the final two verses of the Old Testament. As the Old Testament ends, the Lord says something very specific pertaining to fathers and their children.

He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers.

I can’t think of anything more pressing for dads and families to hear on this Father’s Day than those words from the prophet Malachi. We learn here the family’s greatest problem, the family’s greatest need, and what God has done about it. But to appreciate these vital words we must back up and set the context.

First, let’s set the context in what’s happening in our country. On Christmas Day 2012, the *Washington Times* ran an article entitled, “Fathers Disappear from Households Across America.” It states that in 1960, just 11 percent of American children lived in homes without fathers. That’s about 1 in 10. Today the number is 1 in 3 (fifteen million children; with 5 million, or 1 in 6, living without their mother).¹

So less kids are living with their dads. What are the implications? Here are some other numbers that help us establish a context.²

- 63% of youth suicides are from fatherless homes (US Dept. Of Health/Census) – 5 times the average.
- 90% of all homeless and runaway children are from fatherless homes – 32 times the average.

***Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2012/dec/25/fathers-disappear-from-households-across-america/?page=all>

² <http://thefatherlessgeneration.wordpress.com/statistics/>

- 85% of all children who show behavior disorders come from fatherless homes – 20 times the average. (Center for Disease Control)
- 80% of rapists with anger problems come from fatherless homes –14 times the average. (Justice & Behavior, Vol 14, p. 403-26)
- 71% of all high school dropouts come from fatherless homes – 9 times the average. (National Principals Association Report)

What should we think about these numbers? Here’s the conclusion I read in the *Washington Times*:

America is awash in poverty, crime, drugs and other problems, but more than perhaps anything else, it all comes down to this, said Vincent DiCaro, vice president of the National Fatherhood Initiative: Deal with absent fathers, and the rest follows.

People “look at a child in need, in poverty or failing in school, and ask, ‘What can we do to help?’ But what we do is ask, ‘Why does that child need help in the first place?’ And the answer is often it’s because [the child lacks] a responsible and involved father,” he said.³

It’s this context that makes Malachi’s prophecy so very relevant. *He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers.*

But to appreciate this text, we need to set another context, the biblical context. That context begins in Genesis. It’s there we learn that this is God’s world. He created it, and put the first man and woman in it, and told them to be fruitful and multiply. They were to be His representatives in the world and to pass on what they know about Him to their offspring, so they too would glorify and enjoy Him.

But Adam and Eve’s sin threw a wrench into this plan. Sin alienated the first man from God, from his wife and kids, from his world, and from himself. And he passed on this sin nature and its implications to every other man and woman to follow.

Thankfully, in His grace, God set in motion His eternal plan to rescue a people. He chose Abraham and turned him into a chosen nation, called Israel. He gave Israel His law, which spelled out again the unchanging parental responsibility.

“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up (Deut 6:5-7).”

There it is. Give the Lord first place in your life, by building your life on His Word, and teach your kids to do the same. That’s essentially dad’s job in the world, and mom’s too, as his helper.

But man falls short of God’s standard, in this way, and in every other way, too. He goes his own way, and so does the woman, and the kids. Just read the rest of the Old Testament, Joshua, Judges, the historical books, the writings, and the prophets, too. Man knows what God expects and deserves, but he keeps going his own way.

³ <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2012/dec/25/fathers-disappear-from-households-across-america/?page=all>

And then you come to the final book in our English version of the Old Testament, Malachi.⁴ Has the situation improved? No. Man is still going his own way, and his family is suffering.

Malachi actually begins his book, "An oracle: The word of the LORD to Israel through Malachi." We know very little of Malachi. We know his name (it means "my messenger"). We know he ministered in a difficult time (5th century B.C.). He called his message an "oracle," a "burden." His was a "heavy" message, an unpopular message of rebuke, a call to repentance. We also know he ministered to a people who had a very deficient view of God, and it showed up in the way they lived.

How do we know that? Just notice the dialogue at the beginning of the book. In 1:2, we read, "I have loved you," says the LORD." In a real sense, this is the theme of the whole Old Testament. God loved Israel.

Some have said, "In the Old Testament, we see God's holiness and judgment, but in the New Testament, we see His love." Yet notice, even in the Old Testament, God is love. The Hebrew verb "to love" is used of God's love 32 times in the first 39 books of the Bible. God's love for Israel was unconditional and generous. Time and time again, though they rejected Him, He loved them.

But hold on to your seat when you see how the people responded to God's love. In verse 2, Malachi revealed the attitude of the people, "But you ask, 'How have you loved us?'"

That pretty much sums up Israel's problem. They questioned the Lord's love for them, and they withheld their love from Him.

Oh, they were religious. They *did* things for the Lord. But they'd stopped being amazed by His love for them, and consequently, like their forefathers, their religion became external and hollow.

Which the prophet challenged in the first three chapters. He confronted his people's blemished sacrifices in chapter one. He rebuked the priests for their teaching that fostered this vain religion in chapter two. He even challenged the people for robbing God in their tithes in chapter three.

Basically, to borrow an observation from Walter Kaiser, the Jews of Malachi's day had become "practical atheists."⁵ Oh, they gave lip-service to God. They went to the temple. They even sacrificed their lambs. They "believed" in God, but it was a formal belief, a "going-through-the motions" belief, for the God in whom they professed faith was not REAL in their lives.

So what's the hope for people like that? There's only one hope, and the Lord reveals it through Malachi in chapter four, the final chapter of the English Old Testament. And we're going to see what that hope is as we probe the final two verses.

It's here, in Malachi 4:5-6, that God reveals the family's greatest problem and greatest need, and what He has done about it.

I. God reveals the family's greatest problem.

Notice verse 5, "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes."

⁴ In the Hebrew Bible, the OT ends with The Writings, which concludes with what we call 2 Chronicles.

⁵ Kaiser's term, p. 11.

Stop there for a moment and notice something. Malachi announces that the day of the LORD is coming. Man has had his day since the rebellion in Eden, but the Lord is going to have His day. It will be a great and dreadful day. Malachi has been talking about this day for the latter half of his prophetic book.

Look back at 3:1-2, “See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come, says the LORD Almighty. But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap.”

And look at 4:1-2, “Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire, says the LORD Almighty. Not a root or a branch will be left to them. But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall.”

So the day of the LORD is coming, a day of fire and judgment and purging. But before it comes, something else is coming, says Malachi. Actually, *someone* else.

Notice 4:5 again. The Lord is going to send the prophet Elijah into the world. Who is Elijah? He’s that great prophet who preached a message of repentance to Israel in the wicked days of King Ahab (1 Kings 17:1ff). And what’s Elijah going to do this time?

Malachi gives the answer in verse 6, “He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.”

So the Old Testament ends with a revelation about a future change for the family. Is that significant? Indeed. Why did the nation of Israel collapse? Because the family collapsed. As goes the family, so goes the nation.

Right here we discover the family’s greatest problem. It’s the problem, says Malachi, that God is going to send Elijah to address before the day of the Lord.

It’s a *heart* problem. And who has this heart problem? First of all, fathers do.

A. Fathers have a heart problem. “He will turn the *hearts* of the fathers to their children.” What’s the problem that plagues fathers? Is it economics? Education? Wives that don’t understand? No. It’s a *heart* problem, says the prophet. What’s wrong with fathers’ hearts? First of all...

1. *Their hearts need to be turned.* That’s what the prophet is going to do when he comes, says Malachi. He’s going to *turn* the hearts of the fathers.

What does that indicate? Why would fathers need to have their hearts turned?

If you’re driving down the road and your GPS says, “Turn here,” it means your present course will not take you to the intended destination. That’s the problem that the Lord is sending Elijah to correct. The hearts of fathers are set on courses that will not take them to the intended destination.

This is basic, but it’s precisely where the father’s greatest problem lies. In his *heart*. A man can be busy with lots of good things, but that doesn’t mean his heart is right.

So in Israel you would find men bringing their offerings to the temple, and dropping their tithes into the box, and keeping the required holidays, and fulfilling lots of other rules and regulations in God’s law, too, and on top of that, making sure their kids did the same.

But something was missing. The *heart*. There was a heart problem.

What's that mean in practical terms? To say that fathers' hearts need to be turned means that, to put it in simple terms...

2. *Their hearts are preoccupied with the wrong things.* "Love the Lord your God with all your *heart*," says the Law-giver. "And these words shall be in your *heart*. And you shall teach them to your children."

But this is the dad's greatest problem. He doesn't naturally love God and God's word from his heart. He loves other things. He's preoccupied, not with the Lord, and not with nurturing a love for the Lord in the precious wife and children that the Lord has placed in his life, but with other things.

Like his boat, or gun, or fishing rod. Or his iPad (it used to be his newspaper) or remote. Or the next job promotion. Or getting the toned body. Or, whatever.

So he may bring home the check, but not his heart. He may take his kids to church, but not his heart. His heart is captivated by other things.

And it may not be *things*. It could be pursuits, like gaining respect in the eyes of peers, or making sure the kids turn out, or retiring at sixty. Not necessarily bad pursuits, just deficient ones.

Where does the Lord want fathers' hearts to lean? In what direction? I'm intrigued by Malachi's prophecy. You would expect, perhaps, "He will turn the hearts of the fathers *to the Lord*." Or, "to their *wives*." But no. He says, "...*to their children*."

To their children? Why to their children? Obviously, this isn't a call for dads to worship their kids, which is a huge problem for some dads (and moms), and worshipping kids is off limits every bit as much as worshipping jobs and hobbies.

So why does the Old Testament end with this significant announcement, that the day is coming when God's prophet will turn fathers' hearts *to their children*? Good question. But let's table it for a moment until we see who else in the home struggles with a heart problem.

Verse 6 says, "He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, *and the hearts of the children to their fathers*." So it's not just fathers.

B. Children have a heart problem. How so?

1. *Their hearts need to be turned as well.* And why would that be the case? Because, like their fathers...

2. *Their hearts are preoccupied with the wrong things.* We're hearing a lot these days about young people leaving the church when they go off to college. But the reality is, they already left the church while they were still at home, *in their hearts*.

You see, a child enters this world with a heart that's preoccupied with all kinds of God-substitutes. The approval of friends. Having fun. Video games. Success in sports, or music, or getting the scholarship. Those are the things he or she dreams about. Maybe sinful things, but not necessarily. Just things that become sinful because they take the place in the heart that should belong to the Lord.

So it's dads. And their kids. And for that matter, moms too. And grandparents. And singles. This is a universal predicament. Everybody enters the world with a heart problem.

But in our text, Malachi, speaking for God, has dads and children in mind. Why dads and their kids? That brings us back to the question we tabled earlier. Why does the Old Testament end with this significant announcement that the day is coming when God will send a prophet to turn fathers' hearts *to their children*, and children's hearts *to their fathers*?

It's because something fundamental to God's plan is supposed to be happening between fathers and their children. Fathers are to teach their children to love and live for the glory of the Lord, and children are to hearken to their fathers instruction and modeling.

But this is the family's greatest problem. Father's don't. And children don't. And as goes the father-child relationship, so goes the family, and the nation, and the world.

Thankfully, there's more to the verse. In Malachi 4:5-6 God reveals secondly...

II. God reveals the family's greatest need, which is His grace.

Grace. God's unmerited favor and help. That's what dads need, and their kids, and moms, and grandparents, and singles too. We don't do as we ought. We go our own way and are powerless to do otherwise. Unless God intervenes.

But how will He intervene if He treats us as we deserve. But He doesn't! He is the God of grace, and right here we see three evidences of His grace.

A. In His grace, God predicted He would send a special man. "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes." When is Elijah coming? *Before* that great and dreadful day of judgment. How merciful is the Creator God! Before the judgment comes, He's sending His messenger.

Not a musician. Not an educator. Not a politician. A preacher. A *prophet*. That's what the sinner needs, to hear the Word of God.

And what particular preacher? Elijah. Why Elijah? Because He preached the message that dads and kids with wayward hearts need to hear.

Remember Elijah up on Mount Carmel? "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him. But the people said nothing (1 Kings 18:21)."

So Elijah built an altar and prayed, "Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again (1 Kings 18:37)."

And the result? "When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, 'The LORD—he is God! The LORD—he is God! (1 Kings 18:39)!'"

In His grace, that's the man that God sent in 850 BC. And that's the man God is going to send again, says Malachi, before the Day of the Lord.

What will he do?

B. In His grace, God predicted He would use that man to turn hearts.

Whose hearts? Fathers and their children. In what direction? He will turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers.

Does that mean they're going to spend more time together playing ball in the backyard? That may be a result, but there's something more fundamental that's going to change first, and the preached Word will bring about that change.

First, for fathers. *He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children.* This is what dads need. To stop living for respect, and comfort, and every other self-centered pursuit. And to develop hearts that turn to their children and delight in being God's representative in their lives, for His glory.

That's what the Lord is going to do for dads, says Malachi. In His grace.

And then, for the children too. *He will turn the hearts of the children to their fathers.* As kids, we don't want to give our hearts to our fathers. We think we know best.

We think they don't understand. We think we have rights. We think they exist for us. But that's what the Lord intends to change. Through His Word, He's going to turn children's hearts to their fathers, so that they want what their godly dads want, to love and live for the Lord God.

That's going to happen, says Malachi. And so ends the Old Testament. But not the story. It's my great privilege to announce, it did happen!

C. In His grace, God did what He predicted (Luke 1:17). A little over 400 years later, He sent the angel Gabriel to make an announcement to a priest named Zechariah. I want you to see this announcement. It's in Luke 1:13-17:

"Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

There's God's answer. In His grace, He sent John the Baptist into the world. Why? To do what Malachi predicted. He's going to do what he said Elijah would do. He's going to *turn the hearts of the fathers to their children*.

You say, "So is John the fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy?" My answer is, yes, *one* of them. I think that as there are double fulfillments pertaining to Christ's coming, so with Elijah.

The truth is, Elijah did come at Christ's first coming, on the mount of transfiguration.⁶ And Elijah will come again just before Christ's second coming.⁷

But there's also a sense in which Elijah came in the person of John the Baptist. That's what Jesus said in Matthew 17:11-12, "To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him." And then Matthew adds in verse 13, "Then the disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist."

So John is a fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy. Not the final one, but a very significant one. That's why even John confessed when asked, "Are you Elijah?" "I am not (John 1:21)." And yet, Luke says he came "in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17).

But our question is this. How did John do what Malachi prophesied? How did God use him to turn the hearts of fathers to their children? Essentially, John the Baptist did two things, as does every preacher who stands in the spirit and power of Elijah.

1. *John preached repentance (Luke 3:1-14).* Look at Luke 3 where we're introduced to this Elijah-like prophet.

Verse 2, "The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert."

Verse 3, "He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

That was John's message. *Repent*. Turn in your hearts and lives from your sin to God, and show you mean business by producing fruit in keeping with repentance, starting with being baptized publicly.

⁶ Matthew 17:3 "Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus."

⁷ As one of the two witnesses in Revelation 11.

And he was specific. He told the man with two tunics to share with the one who had none (11). And he told tax collectors to stop taking advantage of people (12). And he told soldiers, no more extortion, be content with your pay (14).

What's involved in turning the hearts of fathers to their children and children to their fathers? This is. The need to repent.

But that's the problem, isn't it? A sinner can't repent, not from the heart. Even once the soldier, or tax collector, or father, or child admits he *needs* to repent, he doesn't have the power. What's the solution?

John preached that too. In fact, he left no one hanging with the foolish notion of a works salvation. Instead...

2. *John preached that people need the Christ (Luke 3:15-18).* "Are you the Christ?" they asked John. His answer? No.

Verses 16-18, "I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

There is the person you need. The One who can baptize you with God the Holy Spirit and burn up the chaff of sin in your life. Who is this One? "Look," said John the Baptist in John 1:29, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

There's the message. Repent, and look to the Lamb. The only message that can turn a sinful father's heart to his children, and turn a sinful child's heart to his father. And that's precisely what it does once its preached and believed.

Make It Personal: What does God want us to know on Father's Day?

Four things.

1. *We need to give attention to our hearts.*

Men, where is your heart this morning? What do you really want most out of life? Be honest with yourself. How you answer that question reveals who is in charge of your heart.

"I deserve some appreciation in my house, after all I've done for this family." Really? What I deserve is hell, but what I'm privileged to do is help my wife and kids know and cherish Him. Is that the consuming ambition of my heart?

If not, I need to repent and look to the Lamb who was slain for my selfishness, and who was raised from the dead to give me the power I need to live life His way.

And children, what about you? Where is your heart? "I deserve better parents," you say. "My parents don't love me the way they should."

And you're right, for they are sinners. And you are wrong, for you don't deserve better parents. Like your sinful dad, what you deserve is eternal punishment in hell. Not for his selfishness, but your own.

Why is it you're never pleased with what your parents provide? Why do you stiffen your heart and resist their efforts to shape you God's way? It's because you need what your father needs, to repent and turn to the Lamb, who alone can forgive you and give you a new heart.

Maybe you're a grown child and doing the same thing. Your heart isn't turned towards your father. In fact, you haven't spoken to him meaningfully in years because you refuse to let go of his shortcomings.

"If you only knew what my dad did. "I'm just giving him what he deserves."

Two questions. One, how's that working for you? And two, what if God did the same with you?

Oh dear friends, we need to give attention to our hearts, and repent this morning, and look to the Christ, who alone is able to save us and change us.

2. *We need to give attention to our families.* Through Malachi, God said this would be the outstanding evidence of His work in the new covenant age. Before the Day of the Lord comes, *he will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers.*

If we know the Christ, here's where it shows up first. At home. In the family. Selfish dads stop being selfish and worldly. Selfish kids stop being selfish and worldly. Dads start living for God's kingdom and they teach their children to do the same. And their children say, "Yes! That's what I want too, dad. Show me how!"

And when we fall short, which happens every day, we repent and look again to our beloved Christ, who alone can turn our hearts where they should be.

So is this how it is in your family? Dads, do your kids know that your heart is turned toward them? That includes your adult kids. Do they know you love them, and want God's best for them? Have you told them recently?

Kids, does your dad know that your heart is turned towards him? That you appreciate him, not because he's perfect, but because he's the dad that God gave you?

You say, "But my dad's no longer alive." It doesn't matter. We're talking about your heart. What place does he have in your heart? Are you thankful for him and how God intends to use his influence for holy purposes?

"But my dad's not even a Christian," you say. Again, that doesn't matter. The Sovereign Lord gave you the dad He intended you to have, and by His grace, He wants to turn your heart towards that man, for His kingdom purposes.

You say, "I'm too weak. I can't do it." None of us can. Which is why...

3. *We need to give attention to His provisions of grace.* Like the church's prayer meeting—do you come faithfully? Like family prayer times. Like Bible reading in our homes. And like this one, the one Malachi emphasizes, *the preaching of God's Word.*

God used John the Baptist's preaching to turn hearts, and He does the same today. But preaching does your family no good if you miss it, because you're working, or at the ballfield, or at the family potluck. The Lord will use the preaching of His Word to turn your hearts, dads, towards to your children, and your children's hearts toward you. But you must cherish those opportunities, and guard them from interruption, for yourself and for those He's entrusted to you.

And one more. It boils down to this.

4. *We need to give our full attention to the Christ.* That's what the one in the spirit of Elijah said, "Behold the Lamb of God!" Does He have your heart? If He does, you can be sure He will turn it, fathers, to your children, and turn it, children, to your fathers, for the glory of His name.