

So Pure It Floats Malachi 3: 1-4

Some of us who were born before 1980 will recognize the title of the message as a sales pitch for Ivory Soap. It was invented in the late 1800s, a much simpler time when choices in the soap aisle were limited to one. Instead of hand soap, dish soap and laundry soap, one bar did it all. One story says that the floating soap was made by accident- the guy running the soap machine forgot to turn it off while he went to eat his lunch or have a smoke and upon returning the batch appeared to be ruined. But rather than admit his mistake and risk losing his job, he decided to use it anyway. Later that week when he took his weekly bath, he discovered that rather than sinking to the bottom of the murky Ohio River, his bar of soap floated to the top. The rest is history. It was simply called "White Soap" until a fancy new product from Colgate called Cashmere Bouquet hit the shelves. The Gamble Company, which would later become the Proctor and Gamble Company soon experienced a large drop in sales of its ordinary white soap. James Gamble wasn't sure what to do about it until the Sunday morning he heard a sermon preached from Psalm 45 about a royal wedding. Verse 8 caught his attention: "your robes are all fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia. From ivory palaces stringed instruments make you glad".

Apparently, his mind was focused more upon improving his business than his spiritual well-being that Sunday morning because it was at that moment that he decided to rename their soap Ivory Soap. More than 100 years later it is still found in the soap aisle- interestingly enough Cashmere Bouquet is not.

The advertising slogan for Ivory Soap has remained the same ever since- 99 & 44/100 percent pure. So pure it floats. Proctor and Gamble has sold billions of the small white bars since then. However, their slogan is slightly misleading. Though Ivory is really 99.6 percent pure, the real reason it floats is because of the air pockets that are whipped into it as it is being made. If you hold an inflated balloon under water, you will see why it works.

That is an interesting story, but what does any of that have to do with all of us? Does it have anything to do with Malachi 3 other than the reference to fuller's soap in verse 2? In case you are wondering a fuller is someone who bleaches cloth to make it white. Fuller's soap was anything but pure as it was typically made with a mixture of clay and a yellow liquid, the same kind of liquid that makes yellow snow. Even though Ivory Soap and fullers soap bear little resemblance to one another they do share one important characteristic- they are a powerful way to remove dirt and impurities.

We begin with some background information about Malachi and his prophecy. Malachi was one of the twelve minor prophets of the OT, and the meaning of his name gives us a clue. It literally means "the Lords Messenger", and the first two chapters of the book reveal that bleaching fabric or removing dirt from one's body is not what God had in mind. Speaking to the ancient Israelites through the prophet, the Lord clearly revealed that His concern was not with dirty clothes or messy hands and feet, but with the filthy mess on the inside of their bodies. They had become unfaithful to the God that so faithfully loved them.

They had largely forgotten that they were people of God's promise, a nation chosen and blessed by God. Two thousand years had now passed since they were delivered from bondage to the Egyptians, and God faithfully provided them with food, water, shelter, protection from their enemies and spiritual guidance. God loved them dearly, and desired nothing in return other their love, obedience, and worship. Yet in spite of goodness, mercy, and grace they continually turned away from God. The temple leaders were corrupt, the people weren't keeping the promises they made to God and each other and if verse 2:17 is any indication it appears that God's patience with them was quickly coming to an end. Malachi warns them that "you have wearied the Lord with your words". It was much like a frustrated parent or grandparent telling a wayward teen- ager that "you are on my last good nerve". Their defense was that they didn't realize what they were doing. They asked the prophet "what do you mean"? What are you talking about? In what way have we wearied Him? They had become so self-righteous and inwardly focused that they no longer recognized their own sinfulness and to make matters worse they were blaming God for the results of their own disobedience.

All who do evil are good in the sight of the Lord and he delights in them.
Where is the God of justice?

A recent newspaper headline indicates that little has changed since the day of Malachi. Hearts are harder than ever and people continue to ignore God's voice and belittle those who do. The truth is that sin is something that Ivory Soap and fullers soap can not remove. It is part of our DNA and something much stronger than soap is needed to remove it. Though an occasional shower is a good thing God is most pleased when we are devoted to cleaning up what is inside-especially our hearts, our minds and perhaps even our tongues. It is those things that will affect relationships. So how do we do that? How do we purify our hearts and minds?

There is only one that can make us pure and restore our relationship with God and for that matter restore our relationship with each other. His name is Jesus-God in human form. Unlike Ivory Soap, He is 100% pure and 100% perfect and if we ask He will wash away even the ugliest of our messes and then help us to become more like Him. Like Ivory Soap He is mild and gentle, but just allow some to get in your eyes and see what happens. It is powerful stuff and sometimes shedding a few tears will be part of the purifying process. It takes place not in the shower or bathtub but right there at the baptismal font.

The problem is that we live in a damaged and filthy world and if we are not careful we will get dirty again. Often times we are like a little kid who would rather step into a giant mud puddle rather than step around it. The good news is that just when God wants to yell "you are getting on my last good nerve" He sees His Son Jesus, cleaning off the mud and dirt and pointing us towards a cleaner path to walk. My prayer is that we will believe and trust in that Jesus and then tell others how He is making us pure....one mud puddle at a time. Amen.