

PURE GOLD  
Sermon by William W. Williamson, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church  
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Malachi 3:1-4

The story is told of a Sunday school class where the children were drawing pictures of Christmas. The teacher came to little Bobby. “That’s a wonderful picture,” said the teacher. “There’s Mary and Joseph and the baby in the manger, and cows and sheep.” But then the teacher noticed another feature of the picture, a brown circle with a head on top and arms and legs sticking out. “Bobby, what’s that?” “Oh,” replied Bobby, “that’s Round John Virgin.”

I don’t know if you’re ready to add Round John Virgin to your manger scene at home. But I bet you’d be more willing to add that figure than, say, skinny John the Baptist. As much as John is mentioned in the gospels—and in Luke’s gospel his birth story is told ahead of the birth of Jesus—it never occurs to us to add him to our manger scenes or to our reading of the Christmas story. All that ranting and raving, eating locusts and wild honey, just doesn’t fit with our idea of Christmas. It seems positively Old Testament.

Actually, it’s not accidental that John the Baptist would appear to us as one of those prophets out of the Hebrew scriptures. John stands in that line of prophets. It is as if he is the last of the prophets, the messenger who will tell of the coming of Jesus, the prophet who calls on people to repent before it’s too late.

John stands in the line of the other scripture we have read today, the prophecy of Malachi. Malachi and John the Baptist are kindred spirits, at least in their message. It’s easy to imagine John the Baptist proclaiming these words of Malachi: “Who can abide the day of his coming? He is like a refiner’s fire, and like fuller’s soap. He will sit as the refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness.”

People in that day knew about the goldsmith who would purify gold by subjecting it to a hot fire. The dross—the impurities—would rise to the surface and be skimmed off, and what would be left was pure gold. It was only by trial by fire that you got gold.

So, old Malachi says, God will subject us to trials of fire, and thereby purify us and make us righteous. One of our hymns expresses a similar thought:

When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,  
My grace, all-sufficient, shall be thy supply,  
The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design  
Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.

God purifies us by subjecting us to fiery trials.

Wow! That's pretty rough stuff two weeks before Christmas. It may be a little early to have visions of sugar plums dancing in our heads, but we've sure got shopping lists in the front of our minds, and what we're taking to the Christmas party next week. So to this offer of the prophet to have a little fire to purify us, we say No Thank You. We'd like to put that off until next year, or maybe never.

Oh, sure, we know that we've got some dross that needs to be burned away, some impurities in our lives that we could stand to do without. There are the resentments that we nurture that separate us from other people. There are old guilts that keep us imprisoned. Old fears and anxieties that we blow out of proportion. Mark Twain said somewhere: "I have been through some terrible things, some of which actually happened."<sup>1</sup> Old loneliness, old frustrations, old greeds. Yes, we've got some dross that needs to be burned away. But not right now, thank you. We've got some shopping to do to get ready for Christmas. Let's put the fiery trial off awhile.

Sometimes, though, you can't put it off. Sometimes the impurities in our lives threaten to take over. We've got to do something about them, or they will destroy us.

Some of you in the church who have struggled with the addiction to alcohol have been gracious enough to share your struggle with me. Alcohol addiction is a pretty big impurity in a person's life. It causes all sorts of problems—loss of dignity and job and money and family and even life. You can't put that sort of thing off. Some of you in

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<sup>1</sup> John Ishee and Paul Barton Doyle, *Spirituality in Recovery: A 12 Step Approach* (Brentwood, TN: John Ishee and Associates, 1997), p. 78.

Alcoholics Anonymous have reminded me of the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. Let me remind you of the first few:

1. We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol, that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. (To use Malachi's words, it could purify us.)
3. We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God.
4. We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves. (Again, Malachi would say we would look to see what in our lives is useless dross, and what is gold.)
5. We admitted to God, to ourselves, and another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. We were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. We humbly asked God to remove our shortcomings.<sup>2</sup>

That's the one: "we asked God to remove our shortcomings." There's an old prayer that would be used at such a time: "O God, mercifully grant unto us that the fire of your love may burn up in us all things that displease you, and make us fit for your heavenly kingdom."<sup>3</sup>

People addicted to alcohol or other addictions know they cannot wait until after the holidays. If they put it off, they die. So God, send your fire. Send your fiery trial. I can't wait any longer.

Many years ago, a minister named Samuel Shoemaker gave a famous talk called "What the Church has to Learn from Alcoholics Anonymous." Here's a little of what he said:

People do not come to AA to get made a little better. They do not come because the best people are doing it. They come because they are desperate. They are not ladies and gentlemen looking for a religion, they are utterly desperate men and women in search of redemption. Without what AA gives, death stares them in the face. With what AA gives them, there is life and hope. There are not a dozen ways, there are not two ways, there is one way; and they find it, or perish. [In the church] we are so official, so polite. . . . One can find kindness and even good advice in the church. That is not all people need. They need to be helped to face themselves as they really are. Too often we see ourselves as we should like to

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<sup>2</sup> Ishee and Doyle, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Roman Breviary, quoted in Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Meaning of Prayer*, p. 41.

appear to others, not as we are before God. . . . Many church people do not really want to change their habitual ways, for they do not want to endure the pain of change.<sup>4</sup>

Those are strong words, but we know they contain truth. The fact is, we need the cleansing of God's purifying fire. C. S. Lewis puts it this way:

Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what God is doing, getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on. You knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently God starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is God up to? The explanation is that God is building quite a different house from the one you thought of—building a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage, but God is building a palace. God intends to come and live in it.<sup>5</sup>

So, says old Malachi, God comes to purify us with fire and make us pure gold.

Did you know that, when it comes to gold, getting it is a lot of trouble. There's one gold mine in South Africa that is more than two miles deep, where the heat and pressure are enormous. They have to mine 581 tons of ore to get one pound of gold. Why do they go to all that trouble? Because it's gold! Gold makes it worth the effort.

We wonder why God goes to the trouble to purify us, to burn away the dross. Why did God go to the trouble of sending his Son to bear the trial for us, to endure the fire of death? Because we are God's children, worth more to God than all the gold in the world. The old preacher Charles Spurgeon put it this way:

God will not desert us until God has delivered us from our faults—until God can survey every one of us, without spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing—pure gold, brought home by God's very Son, without a speck of uncleanness or impurity anywhere.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The article I have is a reprint from an unknown source.

<sup>5</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Collier Books 1943) p. 174.

<sup>6</sup> *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 28, #4, p. 49.

So here comes old crusty John the Baptist: “Prepare the way of the Lord.” Here’s old Malachi: “God will refine [you] and purify [you].” Granted, it may not seem to fit with our holiday mood.

But these old guys don’t just want us to have a nice Christmas. They want to change our lives. †