

Where Blessing is Found
#1 – “Being Pure in Heart”

Matthew 5: 8
Mark 7: 1-23

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Had Jesus said, Blessed are the pure, for they shall see God, everyone would have applauded. Everyone would have been quite relieved rather than be confounded, because purity, as was largely understood within Jewish religious tradition, was all about ceremonial niceties and easily achieved proprieties of behavior. In other words, blessed are those who keep their noses clean, or blessed are those who wash their hands in the ceremonially proper way and correctly do all the other outwardly religious requirements, and you shall see God. But as he so often did, Jesus raised the ante to an outrageous and impossible-to-achieve level by saying that that the blessed gift of being able to find themselves welcomed into God’s presence would belong not to those who were concerned with outward appearance, mere ceremony and well rehearsed tradition, but who were pure, beautifully and spiritually pure in the very core of their being, their character and their heart.

One of my favorite Old Testament stories is that of Isaiah, who in the year in which King Uzziah died, saw the Lord. We read the amazing account in the sixth chapter of the book of Isaiah, wherein the Lord was seen in all his glory and majesty there within the temple where Isaiah was going about his priestly duties. Six winged angels cried words of praise back and forth before the Lord who was on his throne, high and exalted, with glory and holiness shimmering at every corner, and the very thresholds of the temple shaking and swaying. Isaiah’s words are among the truest ever spoken as he beheld God’s radiance: “Woe to me. I am ruined. For I am a man of unclean lips living amongst a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.”

Scripture rightly affirms that it is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God, because if nothing else, before God’s glory, our own filthiness condemns us. The poverty of holiness and goodness, our sinfulness and wretchedness, both our own and that which has filled us from a lifetime of living in a god-forgetting, sin-ridden world, proclaims our unworthiness, our wretchedness, before the Holy One, the King, the Lord Almighty. Thus did Isaiah rightly anguish his unrighteousness; but then, the story says, one of the angels came with burning coal from the altar and touched Isaiah’s lips and, as it were, seared away his guilt, that he might stand before the Lord. It is always grace, and only grace, and – praise God – his abundant grace that allows such impure and unholy and messed up people like us to behold and know the precious pure love of a holy God that reaches down to take us in his arms.

Which makes the beatitude that much more overwhelming in its demand and promise. To see God, that is to be able to stand in God’s presence at the last judgment, and to know ourselves welcomed fully and finally and perfectly into his embrace, has absolutely nothing to do with some level of perfection or goodness that you and I are able to attain on our own. Woe to all of us if we dare presume we can hide the reality of our deeply tainted, sin corrupted souls beneath a skimpy patina of church-going and a few good deeds before an all-seeing, all-knowing and holy God. Woe to any who thinks that refraining from cussing, drinking or dancing, from watching raunchy TV shows or from cheating on your income tax outweighs the bitter anger or self-righteous superiority you have carried in your heart for a lifetime. Woe to any who think that the mixed motive kindnesses or little sacrifices we may have made here and there in our lives would in themselves somehow be able to whitewash the cruelties we have spoken, the indifferences we have shown, the forgiveness we have refused, the selfishness we have cherished, the graciousness we have withheld. No, nothing you and I have ever done or could ever do would be sufficient to whitewash our sins; no surrender, plea or sacrifice would be adequate to address and erase the

ugliness of our brokenness and sin. Nothing could, or can, but the blood of Jesus. Nothing but the cleansing flow of Jesus' sacrifice could heal us, save us, redeem us, cleanse us and make us pure and whole, approved and holy that we might behold the face of God's holy love. Nothing but holy grace could make, can make, this wounded, willful, despairing old heart pure – nothing, but the blood of Jesus. *Though your sins be like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; through they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.*

So, if beholding God can only come by redeeming, amazing grace, what did Jesus mean by saying blessed are the pure in heart? Let me start with a bit of word study. The term, pure, comes from the Greek word *katharos*, which at its most basic, simply means clean. So it might refer, for instance, to clothes that are washed, scrubbed and clean as opposed to those that are dirty and soiled. *Katharos* or pure, refers also to things that without blemish, or things that are absolutely pure in content, without anything foreign, as in pure wine or milk, unadulterated or undiminished by water. It would be used of grain that had been thoroughly winnowed from any chaff or weed seeds; or of silver and gold which had no alloys left within them but are of sterling quality. The word *katharos* was also used to describe a first-class troop of soldiers in an army which had been purged of any half-hearted recruits or mere hired mercenaries who were present only for the pay, but not from such loyalty to the king that they would be willing to lay down their lives.

In the Old Testament, that sense of purity is used in two very distinct ways. Only in a few situations in the Old Testament does the word refer to one's moral or spiritual purity. It was used of Job in the sense of being innocent, of being clear in the sight of God and to describe the prayer of a good man. In the Psalms it is used of the pure of heart or clean of heart. In Isaiah, it was used to mean clean and pure from sin.

In the majority of the cases, however, it simply describes ceremonial purity. Purity has to do with whether particular foods might be kosher and able to be eaten or whether an animal was

suitably unblemished and thus suitable for sacrifice. Above all, the term purity referred to the countless laws and details about how one was to ceremonially wash before meals or about what you could and could not do in order to be ceremonially purified so as to be able to enter the temple for worship.

In Jesus' day, though, purity had been completely externalized. Jesus' controversy with the scribes and Pharisees in the story in Mark's gospel about what makes a person clean or unclean evidences the same concern about the inward person rather than mere external performance. The Pharisees thought purity before God was all a matter of making the right observances, regardless of the arrogance or selfishness, anger or lust, bitterness or even disbelief and rebellion that might be seething within one's soul.

There's a great difference, of course, between just keeping your nose clean and being pure in heart. Most of the time, we are still tempted to settle for the second best of outward appearance rather than want the deep cleansing that goes to the heart. That is what had happened within much of Jewish religion in Jesus' day – lovely ceremonies that had been given as symbolic gesture of inward desire had simply become empty outward gestures. Later on in our service today, you will be invited to come to the table and receive elements of bread and wine. But it is all so much empty and utterly meaningless ceremony if in our hearts we are not hungering and thirsting with life and death longing for the soul-sustaining grace of God. What we do is all so much religious clap-trap if in our hearts we are not asking, praying, longing for God to fill us with heaven's joy and heaven's mercy and heaven's truth. The symbolic beauty and power and meaning of our coming to the Table to receive the very life of Christ within us and to have that grace nourish and transform us is utterly lost if we just go through a bunch of empty motions.

Jesus was and remains intently focused on what is in the heart. Peter Kreeft wrote that a pure will loves God with all the heart and soul and mind. It is, he wrote, "*fanatical*" – *the greatest insult the modern mind can conceive, and the greatest*

compliment God can give. It is also the greatest compliment a lover can give: "I love you with my whole heart and soul. My love is not divided. You have no rival."

Having no rival means we are in no ways double minded. Scripture warns against being a double-minded man, a person of divided loyalties. Jesus said you cannot serve God and mammon. New Testament scholar Clarence Jordan said that *when people attempt to live a double life spiritually, that is, to appear pure on the outside but are not pure in the heart, they are anything but blessed. Their conflicting loyalties make them wretched, confused, tense. And having to keep their eyes on two masters at once makes them cross-eyed, and their vision is so blurred that neither image is clear.*

Do you remember the account of the last supper shared by Jesus with his disciples on the night he was handed over to his enemies? He had warned his followers that one of them was about to betray him, provoking the response, "surely not I master?" To warn of the danger of you and I being cross-eyed and double minded because our hearts are so far from being pure may well provoke the same protest: surely not us! Yet as William Barclay once wrote, *it is seldom that we do even our finest actions from absolutely unmixed motives. If we give generously to some good cause, it may well be that there lingers in our heart some contentment in basking in the sunshine of our own self-approval, some pleasure in the thanks and credit we will receive. If we do some fine thing, which demands some sacrifice from us, it may well be that we are not altogether free from the feeling that others will see something heroic in us and that we may regard ourselves as a martyr. Even a preacher, Barclay writes, at his most sincere is not altogether free from the danger of self-satisfaction in having preached a good sermon. Was it not John Bunyan who was once told by someone that he had preached well that day, and who answered sadly, "Yes, I know. The devil already told me that as I came down the pulpit steps."*

To be pure of heart is to have surrendered our hearts completely to the Lord, that only he may reign in them. Dietrich Bonhoeffer described the pure in heart as being only those

people whose hearts remain undefiled by either their own evil or their own virtue. That is, they are neither crushed by the weight of their own sin nor exalted by the presumption of their own goodness – they only have eyes for Jesus. Their deepest, truest and most constant yearning is only for Jesus. Their last and best and only hope is Jesus, and their perfect joy and enduring peace is found nowhere else, only with Jesus who alone can cleanse, heal, redeem, sanctify and make pure the weary old heart within.

I find it fascinating that the ancient Aramaic equivalent of the word pure is *dakhin*, a word that first of all means broken, humble or contrite. Blessed are the broken in heart, the humble in heart, the contrite in heart, who understand their poverty of goodness and know there is nothing in themselves about which they can boast. Blessed are the broken in heart, the humble in heart, the contrite in heart who know their only hope is a grace more powerful than their sin, a love more full of life-giving power than their souls are full of death-dealing sin. Blessed are the pure in heart, who yearn so deeply for a grace so wonderful that alone can transform them, change them, and do in and for them what they could never do for themselves nor even dream possible. Blessed are those who so want the Lord who alone can make them pure. They shall indeed see God.

How pure are you? Not pure in any righteousness you might try to protest as your own, but in being ready to admit your brokenness and helplessness? How ready are you to come to the table in crying desperation for that grace which alone can heal you and help you? How pure is your heart's readiness to acknowledge that you are a sinner, a helpless, hopeless sinner with no claim on God other than the unbelievable gospel promise that God has claimed you, through the precious and outpoured blood of his own Son and that through the flood of his sacrifice alone, are we made clean? The Lord is waiting to receive any hurting, hungry, heart that is utterly desperate for his mercy, his grace, his forgiveness, his love; for every soul longing to see his face looking in love upon you.