

Blessed Are the Pure in Heart
Psalm 24 and Matthew 5:8
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One of the great difficulties in hearing Jesus preach and teach is the challenge of getting past our own perceived, culturally-shaped and culturally-sensitized view of what we *think* Jesus is saying. For many people, we come to the seventh Beatitude and we think we hear Jesus say, “Blessed are the pure in language,” or “blessed are the pure in action,” or even “blessed are the pure in moral righteousness.” But that is not what Jesus says. Jesus says, “blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.”

Seeing God—that’s quite a promise. It would have been reasonable, it seems to me, for Jesus to have put this Beatitude at the very beginning of his expansive Sermon on the Mount. Isn’t “seeing God” the ultimate goal of religion, the summit atop this mountain we call ‘faith’? And yet, here it is, not at the beginning or even at the end as a climax to his great teaching. So, why here? Why now?

Let’s think about the progression Jesus has led us on thus far. The first three Beatitudes were concerned with our need and with giving us a consciousness of that need. To be counted among the blessed we recognize our poverty of spirit, we mourn because of our sinfulness and meekness follows as the result of gaining a truer understanding of how the self seeks to dominate the whole of life. Then comes the great promise of satisfaction. Having realized our need in the first three Beatitudes, we hunger and thirst, and God fills us to the brim, fully satisfying our deepest needs with himself. From there, we look at what flows from those who have been filled by God—mercy, having a pure heart, and as we’ll see next week, being peacemakers.

So, what does it mean to be “pure in heart”? Let’s start, once again, in the negative. Purity of heart does not mean sinlessness. Our human condition alone ensures that sinlessness is impossible—we are inevitably and unavoidably part of unjust systems that decide winners and losers, from our political systems to economics to healthcare to education. We can’t escape being part of the inequities these systems create. And, then, of course, there is the matter of the individual choices and decisions we each make. But, even there, at the personal level, purity of heart is not to be equated with perfection which becomes clear just by reading

the Biblical narrative. Noah got drunk, Abraham lied, Moses disobeyed God, Elijah fled in terror from Jezebel, Peter denied Christ, and David—well, David was an adulterer and a murderer. So, obviously, the goal can't be perfection.

Instead, those who are pure of heart are not content with the status quo of the inequities and injustices that we participate in, either actively or passively. One of the most conclusive indications that we do possess a pure heart is whether we are conscious of and burdened by the impurity which still resides within us. Do we just shrug it off as unimportant and inconsequential, or do we feel the weight of the impure and long to be purified?

To be pure in heart means literally to be “undivided.” The pure heart cannot countenance any evil—it does not want to even flirt with what it knows to be self-centered or wrong. It is not comfortable in the presence of that which does harm to self or others. That makes purity of heart the complete antithesis of hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is synonymous with duplicity. There is a division between what a person professes and what she does; between how one portrays oneself in one setting but acts in another setting. Later on in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus will say, “If your eye is single (or healthy), your whole body will be full of light; if your eye is evil, your whole body will be full of darkness.” (Matt. 6:22-23) He's describing an interior life that is singularly open and honest, with nothing hidden—a pure heart.

And, of course, that's exactly the problem, isn't it? Psalm 86:11 says, “Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart to revere your name.” The trouble is that our hearts are not singularly minded. They are divided. One part of me wants to know God and worship God and please God; but another part of me wants something else. It's that internal warring that the Apostle Paul talks about. So, perhaps in the final analysis we can say something like this about what it means to be pure in heart: the pure in heart have an undivided love which regards God as our highest good and whose ultimate concern is loving God. Or, put another way, to be pure in heart is to keep the first and greatest commandment: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.

That's all well and good, but how do I get from where I am which is a far, far distance from having an undivided heart, to the purity that Jesus is talking about? Theologian Arthur Pink helpfully reminds us that it's not something we do on our own, but the Christian is made pure by a fourfold operation of the Holy Spirit. First, God imparts to us a new and holy nature. We are baptized into

Christ, made one with him, and we now have Christ's life living within us. Second, we are given the gift of redeeming faith and the Holy Spirit is given as a constant companion to activate that faith in us. Third, we experience the forgiveness of sins which purges our consciences of guilt and shame, and sets us free to walk in the new life we've been given. And, fourth, the lifelong process of sanctification teaches us how to live with God and live for God.

Sanctification is a big, 50-cent theological word that describes our growth as disciples of Christ. Part of that growth occurs as we engage our intellects and learn the truths of scripture. We need to know what the Bible says, and it is helpful beyond measure to read the stories of people just like you and me who sometimes got it right and sometimes got it wrong living as God's people. But, Jesus does not commend those who are intellectual or who have their doctrine perfectly lined up in this seventh Beatitude. The understanding of the mind is essential and doctrine is vital, but we must always beware, lest we stop at giving only intellectual assent to faith. Faith is, first and foremost, about the heart, because it is first and foremost about relationship.

Our sanctification, or spiritual growth, happens when we are moved by a relationship of love with God to implement the truths we discover in scripture, not just agree or disagree with them. Much of our spiritual growth is about learning to see and especially, learning to see as God sees. The pure in heart possess spiritual discernment and with eyes of understanding obtain clear views of God's divine character, perceiving the excellence of God's divine attributes which drives us to worship and to a deeper love for God, just because of who God is.

To an impure heart, God cannot be seen anywhere, but to a pure heart God can be seen everywhere. In addition to the scriptures, we also see God in nature: in the dry and lonely desert, in every star that adorns the sky, in the raging storm and howling wind, in the stillness just before dawn, we hear God's voice, see God's handiwork, experience God's creativity, feel the love God has for us and our universe.

The pure in heart also see God in the church. The divided heart and the cloudy eye will see nothing but division, faults, failures and imperfections, and to be sure, we have those in abundance. But, the discerning soul sees God at work through the ages choosing to work through imperfect people to preserve the sacred story of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Seeing God is about much more than perceiving traces of him in Scripture, in nature and in the church, however. It is rightly seeing God's divine character in the midst of these things and, indeed, in the midst of all of life. Spiritual seeing is being able to hold together the paradox that God is eternally just, frighteningly powerful, unfailingly holy, immeasurably gracious and infinitely tender all at once. It is seeing, even in the calamities of creation, in the inexcusable wrongs of the church and in the suffering of humanity that God is always and altogether good and loving and working for the redemption of the entire cosmos. It takes a pure heart, an undivided loyalty, and an unwavering faith to have this kind of spiritual eyesight. I sometimes wonder if the reason the church struggles so mightily to impact our culture is that too many people sitting in the pews do not grow deep enough in spiritual maturity to ever see God in this way.

If you follow the career of any superstar in any field, there is a defining combination of three characteristics. First, they are passionate about their field. Whether it's Peyton Manning with a football or Yo-Yo Ma with a cello or Bill Gates with a computer, they eat, breathe, sleep their genre. They are compelled by love of the game or the art or the discovery to pursue it whole-heartedly. They also bring some gifts to the table—there is an ear, or an arm, or a mind that is engaged in their craft. But, the people who are at the top of their game never rest on innate ability alone. They work and they work hard. They practice for hours and hours, hours that stretch into months that stretch into years. Alone in the garage or in the practice room or out in the backyard they repeat the fundamentals over and over and over again. They never outgrow the need to do the basics. And, they never get complacent. Michael Jordan didn't make one great shot in the gym and then head to the showers thinking he was prepared for the game.

Yet, for some strange reason people of faith think we can get to spiritual maturity by taking shortcuts. I doubt you will be surprised when I say, with all the love in the world, friends, it's not going to work. Which brings us back, yet again, to the place Jesus always zeroes in on, where we hear him ask us, "what is really going on in your hearts?" Do you have a passion and a zeal for knowing Jesus and loving him and walking with him? Do you have an undivided heart that aches to be part of life in God's kingdom? Or, is the truth that your heart is really not undivided at all, that you're chasing after happiness in other places?

Jesus does not condemn our fruitless and futile search. He simply waits patiently, continuing to love us, continuing to tell us the truth, continuing to invite us to see and follow the one way that will truly satisfy our souls and make our

hearts glad. It's not a way that anyone but the pure in heart will choose, and probably with good reason since the way of Jesus is the way of the cross.

But, the cross is necessary for those who want to see God. It is the place where we are taught how God is at work in the world, how God redeems suffering and the depths to which love will suffer on behalf of another. When we begin to see as Jesus sees, we see God in the midst of human suffering and in the midst of the ordinary. Even the sordid becomes sacred, the mundane need not snuff out all beauty or poetry, every bush is aflame with God, and all of life has meaning.

May we enter these last two weeks of Lent hungering and thirsting for God with a passionate, undivided heart. May we join the blessed who see God. Amen.