

“Spring Cleaning” In the Heart (Matthew 5:8)

We have come to the sixth beatitude: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8). This beatitude has been called “one of the greatest utterances to be found anywhere in the whole realm of Holy Scripture.”¹ It is certainly one of the most challenging statements in the Scriptures. As I prepared these lessons, each beatitude made me aware of how far short I come of what I should be. However, none indicted me like this one: “Blessed are the pure in heart. . . .” My bitterest battles are fought in my heart. As we study this beatitude, perhaps it will also cause you to fall on your knees in penitence.

“BLESSED ARE THE PURE IN HEART. . . .”

How Important Is “the Heart”?

It has been said that in Matthew 5:8 we find the essence of Christianity, for Christianity is first and foremost a religion of the heart. Jesus said that we are to love God with all our hearts (Matthew 22:37), we are to forgive from the heart (18:35), and we are to receive the Word in “an honest and good heart” (Luke 8:15). Paul wrote, “But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient *from the heart* to that form of teaching to which you were committed” (Romans 6:17; emphasis mine). The importance of religion “from the heart” cannot be overemphasized. God told

Samuel, “God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7; see Proverbs 21:2). Solomon wrote, “Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life” (Proverbs 4:23).

Many writers believe that when Jesus spoke of being pure in heart, He was contrasting true religion with what was practiced as religion in Judaism. The Pharisees emphasized outward rituals and ceremonial purity while neglecting the heart. To these, Jesus said, “You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you: ‘This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me’” (Matthew 15:7, 8; see Isaiah 29:13). Again the Lord said,

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!
For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. . . .

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!
For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness (Matthew 23:25–28).

We should not think, however, that the Pharisees are the only ones guilty of giving attention to outward appearance while neglecting the heart. As members of the body of Christ, we, too, can be guilty of emphasizing outward expressions of religion while neglecting the heart. As important as outward expressions are, they amount to nothing if they are not “from the heart.”

¹D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1959), 106.

What Is “the Heart”?

Perhaps we need to take a moment to establish what exactly needs to be pure. What is the “heart”? In Matthew 5:8 the word “heart” is from καρδία (*kardia*), the term from which we get “cardiac,” which means “of or near the heart.”² The physical heart is the chief organ of physical life (see Leviticus 17:11). “By an easy transition the word came to stand for man’s entire mental and moral activity, both the rational and emotional elements.”³

We generally think of the heart as the center of emotion, which it is. We love God with our hearts (Luke 10:27), and we are to “love one another from the heart” (1 Peter 1:22). However, the Bible’s usage of “heart” includes more than the emotions. The term is sometimes used to refer to the intellect. Jesus spoke of those who *thought* evil in their hearts (Matthew 9:4). Again, the word “heart” is used in association with the will, the decision-making part of the mind. Hebrews 4:12 refers to “the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (emphasis mine). The Bible “heart” is the seat of man’s affections, his thoughts, and his motivations. In our text, the word “heart” refers to *all* that is within an individual. It is the center of a person—the center of his being and personality.

What Does It Mean to Be “Pure”?

Jesus was saying that we must be *pure* in the center of our being. “Pure” is translated from καθαρός (*katharos*). *Katharos* is found twenty-seven times in the New Testament⁴ and is generally translated “pure” or “clean.”⁵ The word can be used to refer to physical or ceremonial cleanness (see Matthew 23:25), but Jesus had in mind inward cleanness. *Katharos* includes at least three overlapping concepts, two of which have already been mentioned.⁶

²The *American Heritage Dictionary*, 4th ed. (2001), s.v. “cardiac.”

³W. E. Vine, Merrill F. Unger, and William White, Jr., *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1985), 297.

⁴This count is based on Accordance®, © 2003, Oak Tree Software, Inc.

⁵Robert Young, *Young’s Analytical Concordance to the Bible* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, n.d.), 785.

⁶Parts of the following discussion are adapted from William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 1, *The Daily Study Bible Series* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1958), 101.

(1) “Cleanness.” *Katharos* was used of soiled clothing which has been washed clean. A pure heart is a clean heart. The writer of Hebrews said, “Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification [‘holiness’; KJV] without which no one will see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14).

(2) “Purity.” *Katharos* was used of grain that had been winnowed so that all the chaff had blown away. Pure hearts have been purged of impurity. David prayed, “Purify me [‘purge me’; KJV] . . . , and I shall be clean” (Psalm 51:7a). *Katharos* includes both the concepts of cleanness and purity—but there is one more factor.

(3) “Singleness.” Pure milk is all milk; no water has been added. Pure gold is all gold; any inferior metals have been removed. A pure heart is not filled with mixed motives. Bible terms used to describe those with mixed motives are “double-hearted” and “double-minded.” Psalms speaks of those with “a double heart” (Psalm 12:2). James wrote of the “double-minded” (James 4:8). David prayed, “Unite my heart to fear Your name” (Psalm 86:11c; emphasis mine).

I do not make top grades on the “cleanness” and “purity” heart tests. It is hard to keep impure thoughts out of the heart. However, where I really fail is in the “singleness” test because this has to do with our priorities and motives. William Barclay wrote, “To examine one’s own motives is a daunting and a shaming thing, for there are few things in this world that even the best of us can do with completely unmixed motives.”⁷ Do you want to examine yourself regarding unmixed motives? Then ask yourself questions like those that follow. “What if I get no recognition for working for the Lord?”; “What if others get the credit I deserve?”; “What if I am criticized for trying to do what is right?” When such incidents happen to us, are we tempted to quit?

Most of us have to admit that our hearts are not as pure as they ought to be. How can we have pure hearts? Maybe we need what used to be called “a good spring cleaning.” At the end of winter, when spring finally arrived, the windows were opened wide. Rugs were taken outside to be beaten. Bedding was taken outside to air out. The house was cleaned from

⁷*Ibid.*, 102.

top to bottom. Our hearts may need that kind of thorough cleaning.

At the risk of being redundant, let me again note that the starting place is to develop the qualities found in the previous beatitudes. If we recognize our spiritual need (first beatitude), mourn over our spiritual destitution (second), develop a meek and submissive spirit (third), and hunger to be right with God (fourth), this will go far in making us merciful (fifth) and pure in heart (sixth). In addition to this, let me add a few suggestions. As has been the case with all the Beatitudes, there are actions we need to take, as well as that which only God can do.

Let me start with what *we* can do. As already noted, Solomon wrote, "Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life" (Proverbs 4:23). James commanded his readers, "Purify your hearts" (James 4:8). Both of these writers challenged Christians to do what *they* could to have God-approved hearts. What can *you and I* do to purify our hearts? First, it helps to acknowledge our need and to do our best to keep our hearts pure.

Next, we need to fill our minds with God's Word. The psalmist wrote, "How can a young man keep his way pure? By keeping it according to Your word" (Psalm 119:9). Jesus told His disciples, "You are . . . clean because of the word which I have spoken to you" (John 15:3). We need to read the Word, study the Word, meditate on the Word, and then obey the Word. Peter told his readers, "You have in obedience to the truth purified your souls" (1 Peter 1:22a).

In addition to filling our hearts with the Word, we need also to fill our minds with good thoughts in general. We need to take care regarding what we see and what we hear.⁸ Paul wrote, "Whatever is pure, . . . dwell on these things" (Philippians 4:8). No one can keep impure thoughts from entering his mind, but he does not have to dwell on them. It has been said, "You can't keep a bird from flying overhead, but you can keep it from building a nest in your hair."

All this will help, but after we have done the best we can, we must still acknowledge that our

⁸Apply this to the society in which you live. In the US application can be made to impure books, indecent television programs and movies, and deliberately associating with those whose language is impure.

hearts are not what they should be. The prophet Jeremiah wrote, "The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick" (Jeremiah 17:9a). In the end, we must throw ourselves on the mercy of God and pray, "Create in me a clean heart, O God" (Psalm 51:10a). When Ezekiel was trying to encourage the Israelites in captivity, he shared God's promise: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you" (Ezekiel 36:26a). When we come to trust in Jesus and acknowledge our need for grace, God cleanses our hearts by faith (see Acts 15:9).

". . . FOR THEY SHALL SEE GOD."

"Blessed [happy] are the pure in heart. . . ." What does being pure in heart have to do with happiness? If our hearts are purged of jealousy and envy, our hearts will be content. If our hearts are purged of hatred, we will count no man as an enemy. James Hastings wrote,

[Pureness of heart] frees us from a thousand sources of pain, the inward strife of the heart . . . , the condemning voice of conscience, the fret and worry of anxious worldly care, the bitterness of . . . anger, envy, [and] . . . discontent.⁹

Specifically, in our present text, the blessedness of those with pure hearts is tied directly to the promise "for they shall see God." There can be no more exciting promise than that. According to the customs of ancient societies, to come into a king's presence and see his face was the highest of honors.¹⁰ According to the Bible, those qualified to come into God's presence are those with pure hearts. David wrote, "Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? And who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart . . ." (Psalm 24:3, 4).

Regarding the ability to see physically, not all have the same capacity. My brother Coy has a rare form of glaucoma¹¹ which affects his sight. There is much he cannot see. That is sad, but not nearly as tragic as those whose spiritual vision has been impaired as a result of having impure hearts. Only the pure in heart shall see God.

⁹James Hastings; quoted in James M. Tolle, *The Beatitudes* (Fullerton, Calif.: Tolle Publications, 1966), 67.

¹⁰Tolle, 64.

¹¹Glaucoma is an eye disorder marked by abnormally high pressure within the eyeball. Coy's condition is probably the result of a boyhood injury.

Seeing God Here

Let me again suggest that this promise has application both here and in the hereafter. Regarding seeing God in the here-and-now, we understand that we cannot see Him with our physical eyes. He is a spirit (John 4:24) and is “invisible” (Colossians 1:15). He told Moses, “You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!” (Exodus 33:20). Jesus said, “No one has seen God at any time” (John 1:18a).

We can, however, see God with the eye of faith. According to the writer of Hebrews, “faith is . . . the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). The same writer noted that by faith Moses “endured, as seeing Him who is unseen” (v. 27). Paul said that “we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:18).

- By faith, we see God in nature. (See Psalm 19:1.)
- By faith, we see God working out His plans and purposes in history.
- By faith, we see God in the blessings He bestows on us. We see Him in the provision of a simple meal, in giving us families to bless our lives, and in the face of a newborn child. (See James 1:17a.)
- By faith, we see God in the lives of His people.
- By faith, we see Him working in our own lives, even when troubles threaten to overwhelm us. (See Romans 8:28.)
- Above all, we see Him by faith as we draw closer to Jesus, coming to know Him better.

Most of us see what we are prepared to see. When my daughter Debbie sees an old, neglected house, she sees the potential in that house—what it can be after it is restored. When I see an old house, I see . . . well, I just see an old house. Debbie sees something I cannot see.¹² Even so, in this life the pure in heart see some-

¹²Another illustration is that of looking at the stars. An astronomer and a sailor see something different from those of us who just admire the twinkling dots of light.

thing that the impure cannot see. Only the pure in heart are prepared to see God.

Seeing God in the Hereafter

In one sense the pure of heart see God in this life, but it is after this life that the promise of Matthew 5:8 finds complete fulfillment. John wrote, “Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because *we will see Him* just as He is” (1 John 3:2; emphasis mine). In heaven, we will be ushered into the presence of the King and behold His face. In that heavenly kingdom, “there will no longer be any curse; and the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and His bond-servants will serve Him; *they will see His face*” (Revelation 22:3, 4a; emphasis mine).

What a marvelous promise! The day is coming in which those whose hearts have been made pure by the blood of Jesus—yes, even us, with our imperfections and faults—shall see God! At last Paradise shall be restored (see Revelation 2:7), and we shall have fellowship with God as Adam and Eve did in the first Paradise!

CONCLUSION

“Blessed are the pure in heart. . . .” Paul told Timothy that “the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart” (1 Timothy 1:5a). The pure in heart are blessed because “they shall see God.” In this life we see God with the eye of faith; but in the life to come, we shall see Him face to face. In this life the pure in heart are waiting in the outer room, excitedly awaiting an audience with the King!

Are you pure in heart? John made clear that those who are impure in heart and life cannot see God: “No one who sins has seen Him” (1 John 3:6b; see 3 John 11). Have you become a child of God through loving obedience so that you are now walking in newness of life (Romans 6:3–6, 17, 18)? Perhaps in the past your heart was purified by God, but your vision of God has become hazy and foggy. If so, it is time to be restored to the Lord (see Galatians 6:1). If we can help you in your quest to see God, please allow us to do so.

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