

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Beatitudes	Pastor/Teacher
Number:	7	Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Matthew 5:8	
Date:	July 19, 2020 (a.m.)	

BLESSED ARE THE PURE IN HEART

“I need scarcely say,” commented an old Scottish divine, “that these remarks are well-fitted to excite alarming misgiving and apprehensions in our minds.”¹ This Beatitude is one of the most solemn and searching statements in Scripture. It is therefore one of the most avoided. Why? Because it causes us to ask ourselves a very probing question: What is the state of my heart before God? It is not immediately concerned with external behavior (which can be, and often is, a facade, cf. Jesus’ words in Mt. 23:27). The emphasis is upon that which cannot be seen by others, but is known only to ourselves . . . and God.

- I. **THE MEANING OF PURITY OF HEART.** The “heart” (Heb. *leb*; Greek, *kardia*) has reference to the human center, the inner personal home of feeling, willing **and** thinking. “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked” (Jer. 17:9). “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh” (Mt. 12:34). “Out of the heart proceeds evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies” (Mt. 15:19).² Establishing the meaning of “heart” is not the difficult thing – what *does* trouble people is the meaning of “pure” (*katharos*). The root meaning is “cleanse, make clean.” Its various forms are found 69 times in the N.T. It is used in a strictly physical sense [used 14 times in the gospels in connection with the cleansing of lepers by Jesus (cf. Mt. 8:2, 10:8, 11:5)]. Yet the deeper uses of the word are not physical. They concern the mind and the spirit (as in 1 Cor. 7:1; 1 Tim. 1:5; 2 Tim. 2:21, 22; James 1:27).³ How are we to understand this? First, it does **not** mean **sinless**. Jesus does not mean that, for He will later teach His disciples to pray, “Forgive us our debts” (Mt. 6:12). Having said that, however, we must not minimize the word. As Bailey points out, “External purity (clean hands) is not enough, it must be accompanied by an internal purity (pure heart). As seen here, both of these aspects of purity were in the tradition available to Jesus. However the developing rabbinic tradition placed a clear emphasis on the first. The Mishnah includes an entire division on the subject titled *Tohoroth* (cleannesses) that continues for nearly two hundred pages and includes eleven tractates. Among the rabbis quoted in these tractates is the great Hillel, who lived one generation before Jesus. Clearly this extended discussion on cleanliness was in process of development in the first century. It includes tractates on vessels, tents, immersion pools and hands, but not hearts. There are three levels of uncleanness discussed, and hands are always on the second and third level. In this case Jesus is not critical of the developing laws on ceremonial purity, but he makes the courageous decision to place his entire emphasis on purity of heart.”⁴ The pure in heart will therefore abhor *everything* that is sinful – and this is indeed one of the marks of the pure in heart, that they are always panting after yet *greater purity* (cf. Heb. 12:14; 1 Jn. 3:3).

- II. **HOW THIS PURITY OF HEART IS PRODUCED.** We noted that *katharos* suggests the idea of cleansing or washing (implying the **need** for such). The pure in heart are those (and only those) who see this.

NOTE: In our study of the Beatitudes we have stressed the importance of observing their structure. There is an intricate but crucial point here. The first and the fifth, the second and the sixth, and third and the seventh seem to fit together. It is the poor in spirit (first), who realize that they are nothing but beggars, who reach out in mercy to others (fifth). Those who mourn over their sin (second) are going to know the purity of heart (sixth). Finally, there are the meek (third) who are the peacemakers (seventh).⁵

The human heart is **not** naturally pure. The Scriptures therefore speak of *twofold* washing or cleansing of the heart.

- A. **The Cleansing Power of the Blood of Christ.** By virtue of *this* washing (having our sins and guilt in view) that the believing sinner is accepted before God and clothed in the righteousness of Christ (1 Cor. 6:11; Heb. 10:19-22; Tit. 3:5; Eph. 5:26; Rev. 7:14).
- B. **The Sanctifying Power of the Holy Spirit.** It is the Spirit who “sheds abroad the love of God *in the heart*” (Rom. 5:5). It is He who promises to “direct your *hearts* into God’s love and Christ’s perseverance” (2 Thess. 3:5). Note that in both regards it is something done *to and for* the believing sinner.
- III. **HOW THIS PURITY IS MAINTAINED AND PROMOTED.** The Christian is declared to be righteous before God. But this does not mean that the Christian is free from the presence of sin. “The more advance we make in faith, the more keen the eye of the soul becomes in the discovery of sin, and just because of this, the sense of guilt does not grow less, but rather more in the measure in which we get away from sin.”⁶ Therefore there is the injunction, “put to death (mortification) the deeds of the body” (Rom. 8:13), the things that belong to our earthly nature (Col. 3:5). This pertains to our call to “put off the old and put on the new self” (Eph. 4:17-5:21). To a very large degree our growth in grace is an aspect of stewardship – exemplified in Luther’s well-known remark, “You cannot keep the birds from flying over your head, but you can sure keep them from nesting in your hair!” (cf. 2 Cor. 10:5). If we would maintain purity of heart we must pay close attention to the Word of God [“How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word” (Ps. 119:9)]. We should be mindful of the company we keep (Ps. 1:1, 28:3, 26:4, 5; 1 Cor. 15:33), and, finally, we must be ever-mindful of God’s mercy-seat in Christ. It is here that our sins are forgiven, and it is only here that we are cleansed (1 Jn. 1:7).
- IV. **THE PROMISE TO THE PURE IN HEART.** “They will see God.” The *visio dei*, the vision of God, promised only to the *beati*. [Thus it is also called the *visio beatifica*. This is not a *visio oculi* (a vision of the eye), but what the older theologians referred to as *cognitio dei clara et intuitiva* (a clear and intuitive knowledge of God)].⁷ Note how this is stated, and consider this question by J. B. Lightfoot, “Have you not felt, that according as you have allowed any sullyng influence to stain your heart, and to dim its purity, just in the same degree your spiritual vision has become clouded over, the scales have thickened upon it, and the Eternal Presence has withdrawn Himself in a veil of mist, and you have looked in vain and have not found, and your greatest, truest joy and comfort and hope has vanished from you?”⁸ We are called to always *struggle* against sin (the Armor of God passage in Eph. 6:10-17 has this in view). The fact that we are in conflict should not discourage us (but it often does).

Purity in heart above all else, is the means by which *to see God*. Anything that robs them of this vision is a mortal enemy.

CONCLUSION: “A really sinless, pure heart is in the eyes of a child of God as the pearl of great price, for which he constantly implores God. Yet here on earth it never becomes his portion. They who stand outside of the faith can have no mention here. We readily grant that among them also purity of heart is highly esteemed. We do not deny that among them there are strivings after it. But what they aim at is something different. To the child of God, purity of heart is the means by which *to see God*. To them it is rather the means by which not to fall short of high moral character. And these two cannot be mentioned in one breath. It is a saying of Jesus: *Blessed are the pure in heart*. It was addressed by Jesus directly to the children of God, as S. Matthew (v. 8) distinctly shows. For is not this *pure in heart* followed immediately by the: *Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God*. And it truly speaks for itself that the seven beatitudes together treat of the same persons. *The peacemakers -- the pure in heart -- they who hunger and thirst after righteousness -- they who are poor in spirit*, and so on. Each points to those alone, who place themselves under the guardianship of Jesus, and will to enter into the kingdom of heaven that has come nigh. Virtuous people, as the world counts virtue, moral idealists, are not considered here. Undoubtedly there is a great deal in them, that with respect to this earthly life must be highly prized. But all this is of no account here. The reference here is to those who have been initiated into the secret of Salvation, those who have passed from the world into the kingdom of the Son of God’s love. This purity of heart which leads one *to see God* is not conceivable otherwise than in a child of God. With trembling this is said. To know who is a child of God and who is not, is so extremely difficult. There are those who are children of God, and yet scarcely dare to confess it of themselves. There are others who appropriate it to themselves, yet so little exhibit the marks of it. And there are more still who obtrude themselves in a way which makes you seriously doubt whether their confessed *childship* is not stolen goods. But apart from all this, this much is certain, that the children of God who are most devout and most truly consecrated are continually in the midst of bitter combat just because there is still so much impurity in their heart which continually sullies their life. Sometimes this sulling goes very far, and the fifty-first Psalm is still being prayed, after David, from the sense of bitter guilt which forces the painful cry to the lips *cleanse me of my sins of impurity*. And even this does not say enough. It must be confessed that not seldom in life two men or two women stand side by side, one of whom zealously labors for Christ and the other rejects the Christ, and that upon applying the test of purity of heart and of behavior the confessor of Jesus is shamed by the denier of the Christ. This is grievous for the faith. It is to be mourned over with tears. And yet you may not conceal it. David did not do so, and S. Paul was his follower in this. *The good that I would, I do not; but the evil which I would not, that I do* (Rom. 7:19). And through all ages, this painful struggle has been carried on in Christ’s church. The hypocrites, the false brethren stand outside of this. They have no part in this. No, it is among the sincere followers of God that, age upon age, this selfsame complaint has been heard. Sometimes it has even been worked out into a sinful system of the old and the new Adam, as from his viewpoint of unbelief Maeterlinck is doing now. But however experienced, interpreted or explained, the phenomenon exhibits itself again and again: confession was honestly meant, faith is of the right stamp, and yet, hand in hand with this, the hopeless struggle goes on with the impurity of one’s own heart. To be pure in heart is in such instances for the most part still misunderstood, as though it referred exclusively to purity from sensual sins. Impure is then said to be the voluptuary, the man who drinks to excess, the epicure, the miser, the effeminate. And surely these gross sins should be the first to be denounced. But yet, he who is free from these is, therefore, by no means yet pure in *heart*. Purity of heart embraces the whole life of our soul. Pride, arrogance, dishonest practice, anger, hate, falsehood and the many other vices, including ordinary vanity and satisfaction with oneself, which make the waters of the human heart muddy and unclean. Impure your heart becomes by everything that does not belong to it. As a pond becomes unclean by everything that the passerby throws into it, so is the human heart defiled by everything that God did not create in it, and by everything that creeps into it from Satan or from the

world. And this, now, is the dreadful part of it, that already at our birth so many germs of impurity were present in it which, until our death, will never entirely be eradicated. That we live in a world which encourages so strongly the germination of these impurities. And that we associate with people, who, inwardly as impure as ourselves, accustom us, provided it does not come to gross excess, to make light of this impurity in ourselves, and to make equally light of impurity in them. This weakens, then, our moral sense, our moral judgment, and makes us dream of a pure heart, the whiles in many points we remain impure of heart. If, now, Jesus had meant that only they went out free who had never caught their own heart in any impure thought, inclination or sensation, then this beatitude would fill the soul with despair. For so no one is. Until our death we continue to struggle with the impure germs in our heart. We make progress, but never in any other way than by the application of ever finer tests in order to begin to see impurity now in what before never so much as roused the thought of sin in us. The more advance we make in faith, the more keen the eye of the soul becomes in the discovery of sin, and just because of this, the sense of guilt does not grow less, but rather more in the measure in which we get away from sin. The world does not understand this when it hears a saintly soul, a very angel of love and mercy, plead touchingly for forgiveness of guilt. But by itself there is nothing strange in it. These very ones who are far advanced now discover *sin* in what perhaps before even seemed *virtue* to them. Jesus knew this, and so this cannot have been meant. And, therefore, He does not say: Blessed are they who have a pure heart, a heart without sin, but: *Blessed are they who are pure in heart.* In your heart your ego dwells, your person acts, the child of God thinks, ponders, forms judgments and makes choices. There is a difference, therefore, between what your self finds in your heart and your own self that rules in your heart. And since no one of us dwells anywhere else than in a heart that is inwardly sullied, and from which all sorts of poisonous vapors arise, the question whether you are pure or impure in heart is only answered by the other question, whether your attitude toward these poisonous inclinations of your heart is one of hatred and fiery indignation, or whether you sympathize with these evil inclinations, and make concessions to them with your will and mind. That you frequently succumb is no proof yet that you are impure in heart. It is but the question whether you have struggled against it, whether you have battled against it with all the spiritual power at your command, whether, with the invocation of the help of God and of His Christ and of His angels, you have avoided everything that prophesied your defeat, and are continuously imploring: *Lead me not into temptation, but deliver me from evil.* On this, and on this alone, it all depends. You yourself must be pure as you stand in your own heart opposed to the impurities that well up from your heart. When this distinction between your self that believes and the evils that stir in your heart is lost, you are undone. Then you identify yourself with these impurities. Then you sink away in the evil waters of your own heart, and are drowned in your own sinful inclinations. If, on the other hand, you are courageously and firmly determined in the inner chambers of your heart, yea, armed with bitter hatred against your own sinful inclinations, as against your mortal enemy, then your heart may remain full of impurity as long as you live, but you, your own *self*, are pure in heart, and by God's grace you triumph every time over the sin that waylays you in your own heart. Then Satan can not tempt you, for God is your ally. Then this very struggle which is never given up makes you crowd yourself the closer to your God, and here you will know certain moments, even in the very heat of strife, when with the vision of the eye of your soul you, as it were, *see your God.*"⁹

Acts 15:9 declares that believers have their hearts cleansed by faith – not by works. Likewise, 1 John 1:7 says, "If we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son *cleanses* us from all sin." Sin will always bring misery, it will always weaken, and it will rob the believer of the glory of God. If we neglect our hearts and are careless, what will be the result? As in any other endeavor in life (how much more so the spiritual) we find our capacities, be they mental or physical, atrophied if ignored. "Create in me a clean heart, O God, renew a right spirit within me" (Ps. 51:10).

ENDNOTES

¹ A. D. Davidson, in *Precious Seed: Discourses by Scottish Worthies* (John Greig & Son, 1877), p. 283.

² “Commentators,” cautions F. D. Bruner, “are often too eager to assure readers that the purity of heart in this Beatitude is not, at center, sexual purity. . . . But since Jesus in His commands that follow gives two especially sexual commands (cf. Matt. 5:27-32) we can assume that the purity Jesus blesses is at least sexual.” *The Christbook: A Historical/Theological Commentary Matthew 1-12* (Word, 1987), p. 148. I agree. It is impossible to read the list of impurities in Matt. 15:19 in any other way.

³ For a complete listing cf. H. K. Moulton, *The Challenge of the Concordance: Some New Testament Words Studied in Depth* (Bagster, 1977), pp. 176-180.

⁴ Kenneth Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (IVP, 2008), p. 83.

⁵ Cf. J. MacArthur, *Kingdom Living Here and Now* (Moody, 1980), p. 125. Cf. also W. L. Liefield, *New Testament Exposition* (Zondervan, 1984), on Compositional Patterns, pp. 60-72.

⁶ Kuyper, *op. cit.*, p. 466.

⁷ Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Baker, 1985), p. 327.

⁸ J. B. Lightfoot, *Cambridge Sermons* (Macmillan, 1893), pp. 43, 44.

⁹ Abraham Kuyper, *To Be Near Unto God* (rpt. P&R, 1979), pp. 463-467.