

BLESSED ARE THE PURE IN HEART

Text: Matthew 5:8

(Hebrews 10:19-23, 35-36)

I. Introduction

- A. As I've pondered this Beatitude, in all honesty, the first question that kept coming to mind was "Are you kidding me Jesus?" And then when cooler heads prevail, the question becomes "Is it even possible to have a pure heart?"
 - 1. The Beatitude and the question brings to mind what a pastor friend of mine always used to say—that our "hearts are like cesspools" where all of the junk in our lives gathers.
 - 2. I'm not sure I'd go quite that far, but we can all probably admit to a certain amount of discomfort and squirming when we begin to talk about pure hearts, because we are all usually very aware of the ways in which our own hearts aren't.
- B. And so this Beatitude, maybe more than any of the others, can make us uncomfortable.
 - 1. For this is the Beatitude, if we could manage it, would make all the others unnecessary. And not just the other Beatitudes, but maybe even the Ten Commandments as well.
 - 2. If our hearts were completely pure, we wouldn't need any other rules to follow, they would take care of themselves.
 - 3. As Erik Kolbell says at the beginning of his chapter on this Beatitude, "Each beatitude demands something of us except this one—it demands everything." (p.97)
 - 4. Or if a sports analogy works better for you, you could put it like this: "In this Beatitude, the bar is set so high, to accomplish it is like making a world-record spiritual high jump." And the reality is that we know we're not world-record caliber spiritual high jumpers.
- C. The other reason that this Beatitude can be the cause of such consternation for us is that we get such mixed messages from our society about the whole concept of purity.
 - 1. On the one hand, as consumers, we have been taught to value the notion of purity—and so we are encouraged to buy products that tout their "purity"—from bread to soft drinks to shampoo, if a product says it's "pure" and free from additives and chemicals, and high fructose corn syrup, it's a good thing.
 - 2. And then we watch TV, from the evening news to sitcoms to reality shows, and we realize that we live in a culture that is really anything but "pure"—in fact so much of what we see are shows that tout how much they aren't "pure".
 - 3. And movies? Have you seen any G-rated movies lately? Is there even such a thing anymore?
 - 4. And even beyond the entertainment industry, just in our day-to-day lives, we know that this time and this world we live in is anything but "pure".

5. Erik Kolbell says this: "Communities are gated, airports guarded, cars alarmed, and children fingerprinted...We are as far away as humanity ever has been from that single cosmic moment, that last moment of pure innocence, the moment just before the serpent made Eve curious and God furious..." (p. 98)
 6. In other words, this world that we live in is as far away from the original purity in which God created it as it could possibly be.
 7. And in the midst of all of this, Jesus says we are blessed when we have pure hearts? Really?
 8. No wonder this beatitude causes some consternation and confusion.
- II. So as I dealt with my own issues with this Beatitude, and as I realized that when it comes to having a pure heart, each day can be kind of like standing at the end of the runway leading up to a high jump bar that I know I can never clear, the first thing I realized is that maybe I needed a good definition of what a "pure heart" really is.
- A. And I recalled a book written by the great 18th century philosopher and theologian Soren Kierkegaard entitled *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*. And when you read the book, you find out on page one that that one thing is God.
 1. So according to him, purity of heart is simply to be focused on God in all things.
 2. It means that a pure heart is an undivided heart.
 3. And so as Erik Kolbell says in his chapter, it's simply those things that keep us from being focused on God that cause us to have impure hearts. And it's interesting that he focuses very little on moral things, but more on things that happen to all of us that we wouldn't usually think as being "impure"
 - a) He talks about "anxiety"—those things that keep us awake worrying in the middle of the night as being things that keep us from being purely focused on God. He calls them the "all-consuming "what ifs". This is of course very scriptural, for more than once Jesus tells us not to be anxious about what we will eat or wear, because in the end those things don't really matter.
 - b) He also talks about jealousy. When we get so wrapped up in what others have that we wish we did, that is the sign of an "impure heart".
 - c) Or prejudice. When we label other people based on false preconceptions and treat them accordingly, that is the sign of an impure heart.
 - d) Or self-absorption. When our own accomplishments are at the center of our hearts, we lose focus on God.
 - e) So you see these are not necessarily big things that keep our hearts from being pure, these are just human things.
 - f) And so the secondary question that we all have to ask ourselves, beyond the original one of whether having a completely pure heart is even possible, is the question of what is it in our lives and in our hearts that keeps us from willing that one thing in all things, that one thing being God.
 - g) What are those things that divide up our hearts?

h) Because until we recognize those things, it's hard to get rid of them, and to begin to purify our hearts.

III. So back to the original question--is it even possible? Can we ever clear this highest bar of all? Our founder John Wesley would say no, at least in this life. He always said that total perfection in the here and now is never possible. He would say the same thing about a totally pure heart. But there are some things to remember from scripture that can help us begin to clean up our acts and our hearts, to at least begin to understand what it's like to be blessed for what's in here.

A. The first passage that is helpful is Psalm 51—the great psalm of confession and repentance from King David after he has been center stage in a story of adultery and murder.

1. He comes before God knowing that his heart is in need of major purifying, and what he says is helpful.
2. First, he admits his wrongdoing and asks for God's mercy and forgiveness.
3. Seems simple, but sometimes the hardest thing in a journey toward a more pure heart is admitting we need one.
4. And not just admitting it to ourselves but also to God and also to those we may have hurt along the way.
5. And then the really key verse is when he says to God, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me."
6. That's key because he realizes that only God can really purify his heart.
7. Like I said last week that none of us can be totally merciful on our own, neither can we clean our own hearts. All we can do is what David does here, to ask God to go about his work on us, cleaning up the mess we have made of our lives and our hearts.
8. And then our own acts of purification become our response to God's purifying work within already going on within us.

B. There is also much to be learned from the Hebrews passage that we heard this morning.

1. The writer of Hebrews is dealing with folks with the same dilemma as us—namely, those struggling with having pure hearts in a time that was anything but pure.
2. And the theme of the entire book is how our faith in God and in Christ can help us as we struggle to reach that high bar.
3. In today's passage, there are some key words that stand out—things that can help us in this journey to purity that can seem so daunting.
 - a) Confidence is the first. "So let's come near God with pure hearts and a confidence that comes from having faith."
 - 1) In other words, the only chance we have of ever coming close to clearing the bar is to have confidence in the one who shows us that it can be done.
 - 2) Any athlete will tell you that nothing can be accomplished unless you have confidence. The writer of Hebrews says that this confidence comes from our faith in Christ.

- 3) Is your faith a source of confidence for you in the face of impurity?
- 4) In the end, this confidence that comes from faith is about the only thing that offers us escape from those things that divide our hearts—whether it's worry and anxiety or anger or jealousy or anything else.
- b) Hope is the second. "We must hold tightly to the hope that we say is ours."
 - 1) As David finally understood, our only hope in the journey toward a pure heart is God and the hope that God is never finished with us in his eternal purification project.
 - 2) And we give up holding tightly to that hope at our own peril.
- c) Bravery is the third. "Keep on being brave, it will bring you great rewards."
 - 1) It can take great bravery to live out a pure heart in the face of rampant impurity.
 - 2) To make decisions that go against those being made by friends and even family can be a tough thing to do, because it may set us apart from our friends and even our families.
 - 3) Sometimes the question becomes are we brave enough to sacrifice our popularity as we attempt to be better high jumpers, to go back to that analogy.
- d) And then finally, patience. "Learn to be patient, so that you will please God and be given what he has promised."
 - 1) This purity thing is a lifelong struggle.
 - 2) We can't expect to be completely clean of heart tomorrow, or even the next day.
 - 3) It takes a lifetime and beyond of God doing His purifying work on us to have a completely pure heart.
 - 4) To stick with God as he always sticks with us is vital on this journey.
 - 5) And it can take great patience to do that—patience with ourselves more than anything, whenever we mess up.

IV. Conclusion

- A. So if that is the first half of the Beatitude, what about the second?—"They will see God."
 1. A couple of things strike me about this.
 - a) First, it always helps me to think about that promise as if a couple of words are missing.
 - b) To me, it makes more sense to say, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for **someday** they will **fully** see God."
 - c) For just as we never attain completely pure hearts in this world, neither do we fully see God, face to face.
 - d) But in the meantime, it's okay to do what we did last week with the Beatitude about being merciful, and that is to read it backwards sometimes.

- e) Because while we may not see God fully face to face like Moses did on the mountain in the Old Testament in this life, at the same time, there are those glimpses of God we get every day (if we are tuned in and watching for them) that are also often glimpses of the kind of purity that God is always working to bring about within us.
 - f) Even in this life, even when our hearts are still far from pure, we see God if we are alert enough and if we are looking beyond ourselves for Him. And it is usually in moments when we sense that purity that only God can bring.
 - g) Betty Berghaus: "In this life, here and now, we have glimpses, beautiful glimpses, of what it means to be pure in heart and to see God. We see God in the laughter of children, in the blooms of spring, in the neighbor who brings a casserole when we need help...in the family who gathers around a dying member, sharing stories, laughter, and tears, and perhaps most of all, in the face of the one who lies there, so much closer to seeing God face to face than we are."
- B. Where are those glimpses for you? In a sunset? In the sunshine when it's been cloudy and snowy for so long? In a forgiving smile from someone who still loves you despite you?
 - C. In those glimpses of God, we get a glimpse of the kind of purity that Jesus is urging us to have today.
 - D. And in those glimpses, we experience God's blessing.
 - E. And we are blessed further every day by knowing that when we someday reach the true and eternal purity of heart that will come when we are with our Father in heaven, we will fully see him face to face.
 - F. And so with the confidence and hope and bravery and patience that comes from having faith in Him, we give thanks to our loving, forgiving, purifying God, for creating in us a pure heart.