

## ***“#Blessed: The Happiness of Purity”***

*Matthew 5:1-12 • Psalm 24:3-4*

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • February 17, 2019

I think it's probably safe to say that purity is not particularly popular in our culture these days. In fact, the concept of purity, especially biblical purity, is often publicly mocked and ridiculed by celebrities and politicians. And apparently even by some pastors.

In the 1990s a number of churches responded to the rising teen pregnancy rates by promoting the biblical message that God intends for sex to be saved for marriage. They developed abstinence education programs such as “True Love Waits.” As part of these programs, teens who made a pledge to wait until they were married were given a ring to wear as a reminder. They were called promise rings or purity rings.

Over the past few months a Lutheran pastor who is well known for her crude language and her attacks on traditional Christian values asked women to send her their purity rings as a way of sort of “un-promising.” In return for sending in their ring they would receive a “certificate of impurity” and a new ring with the words “shameless” engraved on it.

If you find this to be a little bit disturbing coming from a pastor, don't worry. It's going to get worse. She took all those rings, melted them down, and created a golden statue of a particular part of female anatomy, which she presented to abortion activist Gloria Steinem at a conference last month.

Of course this is only one example, but our culture routinely calls evil good and good evil. What we desperately need to hear is Jesus saying, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” Why does he say that? Because God is very much concerned with holiness or purity. As we just heard in Psalm 24, “Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully.” And in Leviticus 11 God says, “I am

the Lord who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.”

The first thing we need to look at is what Jesus means by a pure heart. The word pure can have several meanings. For example, it can mean something that's clean as opposed to dirty. Pure water is water that's clean and safe to drink. Pure can also mean that there's nothing added or mixed in. Pure gold or silver doesn't have any other metals mixed in to create an alloy. In the Bible, applied to people, it can also mean free from defilement and free from guilt.

So what does pure in heart mean? Throughout the Bible, the heart is more than just an organ. It refers to your whole inner self – the center of your moral, spiritual, and intellectual life. It's actually your soul. The heart is the source of your will and your affections. Jesus said, “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.” He's saying that your heart is what controls what you say and do. So to be pure in heart means to be pure in more than just your actions. It means being pure, clean, in your thoughts and desires and motives.

Another way to think of this is that being pure in heart means being single-mindedly devoted to God. When Jesus was asked the greatest commandment he said, “Love the Lord your God with *all* your heart, *all* your mind, *all* your soul, and *all* your strength.” How are you doing with that so far?

The truth is that all of us should be struggling with this about now. None of us meets that standard for a pure heart. That's why we tend to think about ourselves in relation to other people. I'm not as bad as that person. I try to do more good things than bad. But God doesn't grade on a curve. He judges each one of us against his standard and every one of us comes up short. More importantly,

Jesus makes it clear that God is not just interested in our actions, he looks at what's inside. God looks at our hearts.

In Matthew 15 Jesus says, "what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person." Later in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus makes it clear that he's interested in more than just our actions when he raises the bar on things like murder and adultery. He basically says that just thinking about them is the same in God's eyes as actually doing them. This is why William Barclay says that this is the most demanding of all the Beatitudes.

So what's the solution? Is there any hope for us? The answer is yes! God is a God of hope. In Ezekiel 36 God says, "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules." This is the good news of the Gospel. Jesus exchanges our sin for his righteousness. He gives us a new heart, a pure heart. Barclay writes, "There is no way to the purity that this Beatitude demands other than the death of self and the springing to life of Christ within the heart. Only the Christ who spoke this Beatitude can enable anyone to enter into the bliss which this Beatitude promises."

Jesus said that the pure in heart are happy because they will see God. What does it mean to see God? I think there are a couple of layers of meaning here. First of all I think it's clear that Jesus means that the pure in heart will see God in heaven. The idea here is more than simply seeing something with our eyes. It's being in His presence. We use similar language when we say we need to "see" a doctor. You're not saying you just want to visually see the

doctor, you want an appointment to discuss your health. In the same way, the pure in heart will be in God's presence forever.

But I think there's also the idea that we can "see" God now. Again, we're not seeing Him directly with our eyes. Instead we become aware of who God is and the way He is working all around us. This begins in God's word. When God gives you a new heart, when the Holy Spirit makes you alive in Jesus, you are then able to see God in the Scriptures. You discover that Jesus is not just a great human teacher but He is God in person. The God who created the universe came here as one of us so that we could know Him and so that our relationship with Him could be restored. And you can only see and understand that because the Holy Spirit shows it to you.

One day Jesus was alone with his disciples and he asked them, "Who do people say that I am?" They mentioned some of the things they had heard. Then Jesus says, "Who do YOU say that I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God." Jesus tells Peter, "flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven." When your heart is devoted to God you can see Jesus for who He really is.

The second way you can see God with a pure heart in other people. As we've seen over the past few weeks, the Beatitudes are about who God is and also who we are in relation to Him. We are people who are poor in spirit, mourning for our sin and desperately in need of a savior. We see that Jesus is that savior, which leads to a new way of living. We also see that we need to treat each other with grace and humility. A new, pure heart allows us to see other people as fellow sinners created in the image of God. When we pay attention we get to see God at work in the lives of others. We won't see that if we're still focused on ourselves.

Finally, if a pure heart is a work of God, does that mean we can just passively wait for Him to change us? Actually, no. I think the best description of what God wants us to do in the

area of purity is found in Colossians 3. "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth." Paul goes on to say, "Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator."

Purity involves getting rid of all of those bad things from your life. But you can't stop there.

You must replace them with something else, otherwise the old habits just come back. So Paul tells us, "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony."

When you clear out the bad things from your heart and replace them with holy things, you will grow to become more like Jesus. And that's the goal. Because to be pure in heart really means to be like Christ. And you will see God, now and forever.

*Amen.*