

The Puzzle of the Beatitudes:
Blessed Are the Pure in Heart
Psalm 24; Matthew 5:1-2, 8

October 31, 2010
By Dr. David B. Freeman, Pastor
Weatherly Heights Baptist Church

Do you qualify? I mean, as pure in heart? I certainly do not. If you could look into my heart, you would see a mix of anger, lust, greed, and pride. In fact, you would see that each of the seven deadly sins has its own personalized compartment somewhere in my heart. Anger is boiling away, waiting for a chance to explode. Lust is there, wide-eyed and drooling. Greed is present, devouring more and more than it actually needs. I can assure you that they're all in there in my heart.

Alongside these deadly sins, you would also see other compartments—for love, joy, peace, and many other good qualities. But that's not really the issue, is it? This sixth beatitude is not about whether we have some good qualities in our heart alongside the deadly sins. The issue is purity, which leaves no room for sin.

The desert fathers and mothers of long ago struggled to achieve purity of heart. They found the temptations of the common life—daily interaction with family, friends, and neighbors and all that accompanies that—to be too great, so they fled to the deserts where they lived as hermits or in small communes. They hoped that the life of solitude, without the distractions that incited their anger, without the temptations that inflamed their lust, would help them develop purity of heart.

Once such brother was so given to anger that he found respite alone in a cave. He believed that only the life of solitude could calm his angry heart. One morning he filled his jug with water, placed it on the ground, and it tipped over. He filled it again, and again it fell. This happened the third time, and he flew into a rage, snatched up the jug, and smashed it to pieces. He returned to community realizing that he could not flee the anger within his heart (R. Bondi, *To Pray and to Love*, p. 43).

“Blessed are the pure in heart,” Jesus said, “for they will see God.”

This sixth beatitude is puzzling, like the others before it, because we know that we don't have pure hearts. And we know the human condition well enough to believe that we're not alone. Others don't have pure hearts either, and neither did those men and women who heard Jesus' sermon on the mountainside. So if I don't have a pure heart, and you don't have a pure heart, then who does? Who were these people that Jesus considered to be pure in heart, and why did he regard them as blessed or fortunate?

Many think that the background for this beatitude is Psalm 24, a liturgical hymn that celebrated the entrance of the Ark of the Covenant into the Temple. At that time the people of Israel believed that the Ark held the presence of Yahweh, their God. To touch it, even accidentally, could bring one's death. The Ark deserved the utmost respect and was housed in a special room in the Temple called the Holy of Holies. On the rare occasions when the Ark was removed from its special resting place, it would be received back with appropriate ceremony. The faithful would gather and sing or chant the words of Psalm 24. When the bearers of the Ark reached the gates of Jerusalem, the people sang these words of praise,

*The earth is the Lord's and all
that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it....*

Then the people, perhaps turning to face Mt. Zion, looking up to the Temple doors, asked these important questions:

*Who shall ascend the hill of the
Lord?
And who shall stand in his holy
place?*

This was a reference to the resting place of the Ark of the Covenant, that special room called the Holy of Holies. Who, they asked, was worthy to stand in that holy place? And here's their answer,

*Those who have clean hands and
pure hearts....*

And here's what that meant to them,

*...who do not lift up their souls to
what is false,
and do not swear deceitfully.*

These people, who refused to “lift up their souls” to false gods, who refused to swear by them, were believed to have clean hands and a pure heart. These people could enter the Holy of Holies because they expressed undivided loyalty to Yahweh. It was a concern for monotheism, the worship of one God. Purity of heart for them meant to worship Yahweh exclusively, to have no other gods before their God.

So when Jesus spoke of the pure in heart, he was not referring to people who had achieved moral perfection, people who could so discipline their minds that they had no lustful thoughts, no anger, and no pride. For Jesus, purity of heart was not merely avoiding impure thoughts. No, it ran much, much deeper. Jesus was talking about undivided loyalty, single-minded devotion to God. Eugene Boring says that it could be translated as “undivided heart” (*NIDB*, Matthew, p. 179). Blessed are those who have an undivided heart, who are devoted to God with all their being. Blessed are those who stand before God with complete spiritual integrity. They do not try to serve two masters. Jesus knew, and we do too, that no one can serve two masters. Trying to do so creates a divided heart where, as Jesus said, we end up hating one and serving the others.

So I would ask you again, this time with a different understanding. Do you qualify? As pure in heart?

I think it is a fair question to ask whether this is a realistic expectation in our complicated and demanding culture. If you are a young mom or dad with two or three children, a job, a mortgage, and all the rest, how can you have an undivided heart? Life for you is balancing a lot of important things. Some of you are highly trained scientists and engineers. You’ve invested years in training to become an expert in a certain area. Your mind and life are focused like a laser on this certain discipline. That’s your loyalty, along with a lot of other things.

I heard one of our members speak recently about the future of technology. It was fascinating. I quickly realized that his profession has its own language, which I didn’t fully understand. He talked about how we are presently going through a technological singularity. A singularity, he said,

occurs when there is such rapid social change that life after the singularity is significantly different than life before it. For example, a singularity occurred when humans went from being nomadic hunters and gathers to building cities and planting crops. Another occurred during the industrial revolution. We moved off the farms and into the factories. He says that we are going through a technological singularity today. We have the ability to create computers that are smarter than we are. Now, I know that's not a great challenge in some circumstances, but he's talking about computers that are smarter than the human race. We are not so far away from the science fiction notion of two super-smart super-computers meeting and conspiring against us. That's your Halloween thought for the day! Here's the good news. We're even closer to major technological breakthroughs in the area of neurology, where super-computers will partner with the human brain to confront paralysis, Alzheimer's disease, seizure disorders, and a host of other neurological concerns.

Now, here's my question. Can someone who is so specifically trained and narrowly focused, so given to one area, have undivided loyalty to God? Can that person be pure of heart? Can a mom who is frantically taking care of a family be single-mindedly devoted to God?

Purity of heart is not about what you do. It is about who you are. Whether you are a nuclear physicist or a ditch digger, a chemist or a roofer, you can be single-mindedly devoted to God. That is the challenge of our Lord. And those are the people whom he deemed blessed.

And here's the reward. They will see God. See God, which many thought was impossible. No one could see God and live, right? That's what God told Moses. Like the other beatitudes, this promise too is future tense. It is an eschatological hope. The pure in heart one day will stand before God, in the fullness of God's presence, accepted by the One's whose acceptance matters most.

So blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Here's my translation of this beatitude:

How fortunate are the ones whose lives are given fully to their faith and God, for one day they will know the embrace of Almighty God.

Jesus finished this great sermon on the mountainside. Then reflecting back over all he had just told them, Jesus said to his followers, “Now, you who build your lives upon these teachings will be like the wise man who built his house upon a rock. When the rains came and the winds blew, that man’s house, i.e., his life, stood strong.”

Closing Prayer

Lord, sometimes it feels like our loyalty is divided among a hundred or more important things. Make us wise men and women that we may distinguish between what we do and who we are. Amen.