

Sermon preached at Woodbury Community Church, Woodbury, MN on Sunday, February 6, 2011, by Rev. Brian D. Schulenburg

MATTHEW 5:8

8 Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT: LIVING AS CITIZENS OF GOD'S KINGDOM #6 THE GOD LENS

He came to me with tears in his eyes, and a heavy heart. It was obvious that the news he was going to share with me had given him quite a bit of heartbreak, and that he was a broken man. As he began telling me the intimate details of his private life the floodgates of emotion could be held in no longer. He wept as he spoke of his addiction to pornography and he was broken over the condition of his impure heart.

She was angry, and felt that she had every right to be. Her marriage wasn't anything like she had dreamt it would be. The best adjective to describe the state of her marriage was the word *loveless*. She couldn't even remember the last time that her husband told her that he loved her. An attractive new coworker readily showered her with praise. She felt her heart longing to spend more and more time with him. When attraction led to infidelity she too was struck to the core at the condition of her impure heart.

It had been a difficult financial year. Even though Bill and Stacy each had full-time jobs, the bills outnumbered their take home pay, and Bill was forced to find extra sources of income just to make ends meet. God blessed Bill with a great personality, expertise in his field, and a penchant for making friends. So consequently, offers for Bill to consult came in at a steady pace. Soon the income from Bill's consulting business rivaled his income from his full-time employment. A number of Bill's clients paid Bill "under the table" with cash. Bill remembers thinking, "It sure would be a lot simpler not to report this income to the IRS." And then he too was struck to the core at the condition of his impure heart.

In His Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5:8, Jesus shared the sixth Beatitude. Like those that preceded it, the Beatitude included a statement about those who are blessed and the blessing itself. This time, Jesus' words were, "8 Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God."

Sight is a beautiful thing. I have known a few blind people in my life, and each of them shared with me how much they have longed to be able to see. To my knowledge, none of them has ever received sight. But, that prospect isn't entirely impossible. For some blind people, surgery gives them the ability to see. Kent Hughes shares the story of the Anna Mae Pennica, a sixty-two-year-old woman who had been blind from birth.

At age forty-seven she married a man she met in a Braille class; and for the first fifteen years of their marriage he did the seeing for both of them until he completely lost his vision (to retinitis pigmentosa). Mrs. Pennica had never seen the green of spring or the blue of a winter sky. Yet because she had grown up in a loving, supportive family, she never felt resentful about her handicap and always exuded a remarkably cheerful spirit.

Then in October 1981 Dr. Thomas Petit of Jules Stein Eye Institute of the University of California at Los Angeles performed surgery to remove the rare congenital cataracts from the lens of her left eye – and Mrs. Pennica saw for the first time ever! The newspaper account does not record her initial response, but it does tell us she found that everything was “so much bigger and brighter” than she ever imagined. While she immediately recognized her husband and others she had known well, other acquaintances were taller or shorter, heavier or skinnier than she had pictured them.

Since that day Mrs. Pennica has hardly been able to wait to wake up in the morning, splash her eyes with water, put on her glasses, and enjoy the changing morning light. Her vision is almost 20/30 – good enough to pass a driver’s test.

Think how wonderful it must have been for Anna Mae Pennica when she looked for the first time at the faces she had only felt, or when she saw the kaleidoscope of a Pacific sunset or a tree waving its branches or a bird in flight. The gift of physical sight is wonderful. And the miracle of seeing for the first time can hardly be described.

Yet there is a seeing that surpasses even this – and that is seeing God. Since nothing is higher than God, seeing God is logically the greatest joy one can experience. Thus, when we pass from this world and see the face of Christ, the joy of that first split second will transcend all the accumulated joys of life. It will be the highest good, the summum bonum, the greatest joy, beside which the wonderful story of Mrs. Pennica’s “miracle” fades in comparison.

*That is what the sixth Beatitude is about – seeing God . . . Jesus’ words tell us how to get 20/20 spiritual vision. If we want to see God, this is **the** great text.¹*

Last Saturday, one of my co-workers at Wooddale lost her husband. He passed away while the he and his wife were sharing their morning coffee. Vicki said, “He died in my arms.” It was a complete shock. His heart just stopped. At Roger’s funeral this week, Leith Anderson said, “Roger woke up on Saturday expecting it to be like any other Saturday, and instead was surprised when he met Jesus face to face.” My friend Roger is experiencing a joy like no other today. It’s his second Sunday in heaven. And I’ve got to believe that like Mrs. Pennica he must splash his eyes with water each day, hardly being

¹ Kent Hughes, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Message of the Kingdom*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), pp. 53-54.

able to contain the excitement of seeing God. Roger is with God today, because he had a pure heart.

Perhaps you are here today and your thoughts are, “Oh great, if only the pure in heart will see God (and, remember the Beatitudes’ rewards are for they and they only who are described as pure in heart) – if only the pure in heart will see God, I may as well give up now. Because, my heart is far from pure! If anything, my heart, the things that I desire, are too often impure.”

As we have done many times before in this series let’s take a look at what it means to “pure in heart.”

I was on Facebook this week, and a pastor friend from Illinois put the following quote on his page. It’s a quote from Martin Luther, who said this when preaching on this very same verse. “What is meant by a ‘pure heart’ is this: one that is watching and pondering what God says and replacing its own ideas with the word of God. . . therefore, though a common laborer, a shoemaker, or a blacksmith may be dirty and sooty or may smell because he is covered with dirt and pitch, still he may sit at home and think, ‘My God has made me a man. He has given me my house, wife, and child and has commanded me to love them and to support them with my work.’ Note that he is pondering the Word of God in his heart; and though he stinks outwardly, inwardly he is pure incense before God.”²

To be pure in heart is to replace our own ideas with the Word of God. I love that. We’re watching and pondering what God says.

William Barclay, the great New Testament scholar, sheds even more light on the meaning of the word “pure” in pure in heart. He says that the Greek word was “used to describe clear water, sometimes metals without alloy, sometimes grain that had been winnowed, and sometimes feelings that are unmixed.”³

Hughes writes, “As it is used in our text it carries the idea of being free from every taint of evil. We must keep this squarely in mind because it is normally supposed that ‘pure’ as in ‘pure in heart’ primarily refers to being pure in mind regarding matters of sensuality. It certainly includes these matters. But the idea cannot be so limited, for it goes much deeper. Here in the sixth Beatitude it means a heart that does not bring mixed motives and divided loyalties to its relationship with God. It is a heart of singleness and devotion to God – pure unmixed devotion.”⁴

Is that your heart? Are you so in love with God that your allegiance is first and foremost to Him? The heart that is pure is the heart of undivided allegiance to God.

² Martin Luther, *Sermon on the Mount: The Beatitudes; Blessed are those of pure heart, for they shall see God* - Cited from *Heritage of Great Evangelical Teaching* (Thomas Nelson, 1997)

³ William Barclay, *A New Testament Wordbook* (New York: Harper, n.d.), p. 69.

⁴ Hughes, p. 55.

When Jesus taught this sixth Beatitude, those who listened to His message would have recalled the Old Testament passages that spoke about the pure heart.

King David wrote in Psalm 24:3-4 about the one who would see God. Listen to his words:

3 Who may ascend the hill of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place? 4 He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false.

There is that word! Who will see God? The one with the pure heart will see God.

James 4:7-10 speaks about the importance of being people whose loyalties are not divided between the world and God.

7 Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8 Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. 9 Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. 10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

Kent Hughes and Martyn Lloyd-Jones were both careful to point out that in the Bible, when we see the word, “heart,” it is referring to more than just our mind. It includes the emotions and will. Hughes writes, “It is the totality of our ability to think, feel and decide. So ‘pure in heart’ means that not only our minds but our feelings and actions are to be concentrated singly on God. If our focus is merely intellectual, we are not pure in heart. As Martyn Lloyd-Jones paraphrases it, ‘Blessed are those who are pure, not only on the surface but in the center of their being and at the source of every activity.’ That is a daunting requirement – a radical cleanness of heart, totally focused on God. . .

Ivan Turgenev, the nineteenth-century Russian novelist, (speaks for us all) wrote:

I do not know what the heart of a bad man is like. But I know what the heart of a good man is like. And it is terrible.”⁵

This brings us back to our problem! How many of us can honestly say that we are pure in heart?

The good news today is that the Bible is full of stories of the impure whose hearts are made pure by the touch of God within them. Without God, it is impossible for any of us to have a pure heart.

His name was Saul. He was a religious zealot who was concerned about a new religious sect that claimed that Jesus was the Messiah. Saul did everything he could to extinguish this threat to traditional Jewish teaching once and for all. The book of Acts records his story. It’s in chapter 7 of this book that we read of the first Christian martyr – Stephen. He

⁵ Hughes, pp. 55-56.

was a preacher, who told all who would listen about God's love. But Saul and Sanhedrin, the religious elite, didn't approve of Stephen's message. They murdered him, stoning him to death. Acts chapter 8 begins with these words, "1 And Saul was there, giving approval to his death."

The very next chapter of Acts begins with this story:

1 Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest 2 and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. 3 As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. 4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

5 "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. 6 "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

7 The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. 8 Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing.

(Acts 9:1-8a)

The same Saul who was breathing out murderous threats against God's followers, was invited by God to join the Kingdom of the pure in heart. Why would God choose a murderer to be one of His children?

Her name isn't recorded in Scripture. All we know is that she was an adulteress. The Gospel of John, Chapter 8 records her story. Pulled from the arms of her lover by yet another group of religious leaders, she was to be made an example of in a raucous spectacle of trial and stoning. The law stated that any adulterer could be put to death, and the religious leaders intended to see that the law was fulfilled to its letter. Just as it looks like it will be too late for this woman, Jesus begins to write something on the ground with one of his fingers.

Some have speculated that Christ was writing the Ten Commandments, but the truth is we just don't know what it was. But whatever it was, coupled with His words, "7 If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her," caused every stone to drop. How beautiful that the only One without sin was the One who caused all the stones to drop. He whose heart knew nothing put purity, caused those who were pure on the outside, but filthy on the inside, to recognize their station in life.

Listen to the Apostle John's description of the rest of the story, " 9 At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with

the woman still standing there. 10 Jesus straightened up and asked her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?'

11 'No one, sir,' she said.

'Then neither do I condemn you,' Jesus declared. 'Go now and leave your life of sin.'"

(John 8:9-11)

Her heart was impure, but Jesus offered to make it pure.

Want more stories? Then read of the original sinners, Adam and Eve; the adulterers, David and Bathsheba; those who laughed at God, Abraham and Sarah, a prostitute named Rahab; and idolater named Ruth; a scoundrel named Jacob, a financial swindler named Matthew; a betrayer named Peter; a coward named Timothy; a quitter named Mark; a rejecter named Jonah and the list goes on. People whose hearts were anything but pure who are now seeing God.

That list includes my friend Roger. It includes everyone who has passed from this life to the next, who found forgiveness and grace through the blood of Jesus Christ.

What is the miracle of Matthew 5:8? The miracle is that anyone can have a heart that is pure. Blessed are the pure in heart. The same Saul of whom we read earlier had his name changed to Paul when he was met by God. But he received more than a name change. He was spiritually blind, when he encountered the living God he became physically blind, and when he gave God his life he received back his physical sight and was given spiritual sight. So much was he changed that Paul wrote over 2/3 of what we now call The New Testament. He was even more of a zealot after he met Christ, never ceasing to serve Him with everything that he had. His heart was one of full allegiance to Christ. He never stopped being amazed that God would seek out someone with as impure a heart as his. In his letter to the followers of Jesus in Rome, Paul wrote,

21 So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. 22 For in my inner being I delight in God's law; 23 but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. 24 What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? 25 Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.

(Romans 7:21-25)

In a similar sentiment, written to a young man he mentored named Timothy, Paul wrote,

14 The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. 15 Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. 16 But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might

display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.

(1 Timothy 1:14-16)

Paul understood. His heart wasn't pure because of anything he possessed within himself. His heart was pure because of the transforming work of God within him.

And, what did Paul gain? The same thing that everyone who has ever trusted Jesus as Lord and Savior gains! He was given spiritual sight. He would see God.

Let me tell you what happens when we become pure in heart. We begin to see God immediately. Sure, there is a sense in which this Beatitude tells of the future in heaven that all who follow Christ will receive. There will come a day in which our faith will be sight. Horatio Spafford's hymn, *It Is Well With My Soul*, ends with this verse:

*And Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight,
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll;
The trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend,
Even so, it is well with my soul.*

I love the chorus of MercyMe's song, *I Can Only Imagine*:

*Surrounded by Your glory, what will my heart feel
Will I dance for you Jesus or in awe of you be still
Will I stand in your presence or to my knees will I fall
Will I sing hallelujah, will I be able to speak at all
I can only imagine . . . I can only imagine.*

We will one day, see God face-to-face. No more imagination! Job wrote about that day in Job 19:25-27:

25 I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth.
26 And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; 27 I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!

But those who are pure in heart see God today as well!

The pure in heart look for God's hand, as God answers prayer. They recognize God in creation. They crave God's Word. They long to spend time with Him. Because their heart is undivided!

So many of the Psalms speak in poetic language about the fact God is revealed in creation. We see God in His people. We see Him in the daily events of our life. When I was

growing up, my mother was always talking about how God had worked in her life that day. I'd continually hear stories about how God protected her on the road while she was driving, or how God spoke to her through His Word, or how He used another believer to send her a card or speak a word when she needed to hear it. She was continually looking for God in her life, and her life was one continual God sighting after another. She is one of those people in my life in whom I most saw God. Her heart was pure. She wouldn't say so, but her children would. Her spouse would. And, I think God would too. In fact, I think God would say the same thing about many of you here today.

The Beatitudes begin by speaking of our spiritual poverty and that we can only enter the kingdom of heaven when we recognize that condition. It is this recognition that makes it possible for us to see our total inadequacy to do anything about our impure heart when left to ourselves. Jesus knew about our condition when he shared the truth of Matthew 5:8 and He knew that the way to accomplish Matthew 5:8 in our lives was for Him to be our Purifier.

Do you remember when the film *The Passion of the Christ* came out? It was a fascinating time in our nation's history. Opinions regarding the film were given on every television network in the land. You couldn't turn on a talk radio station without hearing about the film. In the week after its release, I was listening to KFAN, the local sports talk station and every single show referenced the film. I was surprised to hear the positive comments coming from the normally crass guys on the sports radio station. Each host described the way that the film moved them. The phrase I repeatedly heard in one way or another was, "I can't get over how much Jesus suffered for the sins of the world."

I don't know about you, but as I look around at society today, I see people trying to fill their lives with any number of things – diversions, money, status, excitement, things. And, I can't help but think that as a society we are thirsty for more. We are thirsty for God. Remember, it was A. W. Tozer who said, "Thirsty hearts are those whose longings have been awakened by the touch of God within them."⁶

Are you thirsty for something deeper? Good. Because, that longing is evidence of the work of God within you! Do you want a pure heart? A pure heart is a forgiven heart. It begins with acknowledging that you need God. Paul, that apostle whose life was so transformed by God said, "23 For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23) He also said that what we deserve for our sin is eternal separation from God, but that God's gift to us is eternal life through Jesus Christ his son. Why do we celebrate Good Friday? Because, the best gift that was ever given to humanity was given on that day! Jesus paid the sacrifice for our sins. He died so that we could live. He knew that there was absolutely no way even the most perfect human being could have a pure heart, and thus see God, apart from His work within them. Paul described the miracle of how we see God in Romans 10:9, when he wrote, "9 if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved."

⁶ Brent Curtis and John Eldredge, *The Sacred Romance*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), p. 1.

I am so glad that Jesus loves me. I am so glad that he can make an impure heart pure. I am so glad that even though the struggle with impurity continues until we one day get to heaven, that God gives us the strength to win battle after battle. Is my heart completely pure? Absolutely not! I feel like Paul who said, "I am the worst of sinners." But I feel so blessed because of Jesus' forgiveness, which in God's eyes makes me able to say, "Blessed is Brian for he will see God." Can you say that today? If not, why not let today be the day that you allow God to purify your heart? He will do that for you. It's as simple as praying, "Dear God, I am guilty of sin. My heart is not completely pure, but I believe that because of your death and resurrection I can have a pure heart. Forgive me for all the wrong things I've done in my life. Take control of my life today as I confess you as Lord of my life. In Jesus name, Amen."

If you prayed that prayer, Christ has taken your impure heart, and made it pure.

Just before we go to communion, I want to close with an illustration from Billy Graham.

"Visiting in a mining town, a young minister was being escorted through one of the coal mines. In one of the dark, dirty passageways, he spied a beautiful white flower growing out of the black earth of the mine. "How can there be a flower of such purity and beauty in this dirty mine?" the minister asked the miner. "Throw some coal dust on it and see," was the reply. The minister did so and was surprised that as fast as the dirt touched those snowy petals, it slid right off to the ground, leaving the flower just as lovely as before. It was so smooth that the dirt could not cling to the flower."

"Our hearts can be the same way. We cannot help it that we live in a world filled with sin, any more than the flower could change the place where it was growing. But God can keep us so pure and clean that though we touch sin on every side, it will not cling to us. We can stand in the midst of it just as white and beautiful as that flower."⁷

Listen to Kent Hughes' amplified version of today's Beatitude. "Blessed [approve of God] are the pure in heart [those with a clean, unmixed heart for God] for they will [continuously] see God [in life and in eternity]."⁸

Does that describe you? If so, "Blessed are you – the pure in heart, for you will see God!"

⁷ <http://www.c-we.com/adelumc/060820.htm>

⁸ Hughes, p. 58.