

BLESSED ARE THE PURE IN HEART

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, August 7, 2016
Based on Psalm 24:3-5, Psalm 51:10-12, Ezekiel 36:26-28; James 4:8, Matthew 5:8***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a summer sermon series entitled, “Bless you—experiencing God’s blessing in a life full of challenge.” We have noted that the central teaching of Jesus about blessing is found in the Beatitudes, the eight “blessed are” sayings with which Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount. Each beatitude has two phrases. The first describes a spiritual quality that leads to blessing; the second phrase describes the specific result of that spiritual quality. So Jesus would say, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they will be satisfied.” Or “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.” Today our focus is on to the sixth Beatitude, where Jesus says, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” When the Beatitude ends, “they shall see God,” you know we have arrived at the very core of the spiritual life. In fact the theme of “purity of heart” plays a central role in the overall teaching of Jesus, as we will see this morning. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

We just recently completed the presidential national convention season. Thank heaven, we can now turn our attention to something really inspiring—the summer Olympics. We have come to view presidential conventions with a degree of suspicion—perhaps this year more than usual. Conventions are places of bold pronouncements and dazzling promises. But we are concerned about what is really there beneath the show.

This basic issue—the need to look past outward appearances to see what is truly there—is a major spiritual issue in the teaching of Jesus. In Jesus’ day, people were very good at looking pious. Today there’s not much to be gained by looking pious—unless you are a political candidate, in which case you want to at least have the appearance of having religion—but people in general do want to have the appearance of being good, upstanding citizens. In Jesus’ time, people made themselves look good by carefully following the Jewish rules for ritual cleanness. They washed their hands and their dishes in a certain way, they wore their garments in a certain way, they followed elaborate rules for the keeping the Sabbath, and so forth. The ones who were the best at following these rules were part of the group called the Pharisees, and they looked very respectable. But Jesus sharply critiqued the Pharisees; as he said, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside you are full of greed and self-indulgence. You are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of bones and all kinds of filth. So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.” [Matthew 23:25-28]

Jesus emphasized that it is what is in the inside, in the heart, that counts. As he said, “Out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, not eating with unwashed hands.” [Matt. 15:19-20] It is this concern that comes to the fore in the beatitudes where he says, “Blessed are the

pure in heart.” But what does it mean exactly to be pure in heart?

Every winter we host the Farmer’s Market in Pierson Hall at our church, and one of the vendors I visit sells maple syrup from a local farm. Its bottles are labeled, “Pure Ohio Maple Syrup.” The word “pure” means that there’s nothing else mixed in—no additives, no extra sugar, no artificial color—nothing else mixed in. This is the basic meaning of the Greek word translated in our passage as pure—the word *katharos*, from which we get the word “catharsis,” indicating a purging or purification. The word referred to something that was without taint or impurity, such as pure gold.

So what is a pure heart? In Biblical times, the hands were a symbol for your actions; the heart was considered the seat of your intentions or your desires. So when the Psalm says, “Who can ascend the mountain of the Lord?—those with clean hands and a pure heart” [Psalm 24:3-4]—it is saying that in order to be in fellowship with God, in order to have blessedness, we need not only to have right actions, but, far more, our will, our intent, our desires need to be pure. This means we need the right intention with nothing else mixed in.

Precisely here we encounter one of the major spiritual issues of life. We often have noble intentions with some less than noble intentions mixed in. People aspire to high office, with the desire to do some good, but also with the desire for power and glory. People want to contribute to some good cause, but they also want credit and acclaim for doing so. People give God glory, but also want God to give them some really nice things in return. This is what James was talking about, in the passage we heard earlier, when he spoke of our need for purity of heart, and our human problem that so often we are doubleminded, that is: our will--our desire--is a mixture of godly and less than godly or self-centered intentions. [*“Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you doubleminded.” (James 4:8)*]

But impurity can really mess up something that is otherwise good. Chipotle, for example, was having great success in its restaurants selling burritos that were touted as being especially wholesome. But then some burritos became tainted. Impurity in what was otherwise good food derailed the company’s whole trajectory of success. In a similar fashion, in our spiritual lives, even the best of intentions can be derailed when we do not have purity of heart.

A prime example of this can be seen in what has been happening in recent months in relations between police and African-Americans. Police officers go on the job with the most noble intention—to protect the public safety. But what happens if along with that intention there is also some racist prejudice mixed in? In the heat of a moment, bad decisions can result. Or what if, in response, a protester, desiring to uphold principles of social justice, also harbors deep feelings of hatred and rage toward police? We have seen some very bad actions in past weeks as the result of that. On every side, the desire for justice is derailed when there is no purity of heart.

Jesus described what purity of heart is when he talked about the greatest commandment, and said that the greatest commandment is “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, mind, and strength,” (Mark 12:30) and as a

result, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Mark 12:31) Rather than being doubleminded, we are called to be single-minded—to direct our heart wholly to God, so that we seek authentically to do God’s will and to live out the love of God.

But how can we come to such purity of heart? If there is anything we are likely to observe about ourselves, it is that we do not have purity of heart; in our innermost being we are flawed, and we can never manage to purify our hearts on our own. It is only by the grace of God that we can begin to come to purity of heart. So the Psalmist looked to God, praying, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.” (Psalm 51:10) This yearning for the spiritual working of God is ultimately answered in God’s promise through the prophet Ezekiel, as God says, “A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you.” (Ezekiel 36:26) It is a promise that is fulfilled through Jesus Christ.

Christ gives us a new heart by bringing us forgiveness and renewal; the grace of Christ spiritually cleanses us of all that would soil our souls. And Christ gives us a new spirit by empowering us with His Holy Spirit, so that we are enabled finally to direct our intentions rightly. So it is by opening ourselves to Christ in faith that we can be brought to purity of heart. The apostle Peter, in the book of Acts, spoke about this when he said that “God, who knows the human heart, testified to people by giving them the Holy Spirit, and in cleansing their hearts by faith.” (Acts 15:8-9) And the apostle John encouraged his readers saying, “All who hope in Christ become purified, as He is pure.” (1 John 3:3)

There's a story about a mother and her three year old daughter who were sitting side by side on a couch when suddenly the little girl put her head on her mother's chest and began to listen. “What are you doing?” asked the mother. “I'm listening for Jesus in your heart,” came the reply. “Well,” said the mother, “what do you hear?” The little girl said, “Sounds like he's making coffee to me.”

What is Jesus doing in your heart? The good news is that Christ not only calls us to have purity of heart; Christ enables us to have purity of heart, when we open ourselves to how He will be at work today inside of us—to cleanse our hearts and to guide us to fix our desires on the things of God's Kingdom.

As we receive the purifying grace of Christ, the result, Jesus said, is that “we will see God.” On one level, this could be understood as referring to the ultimate promise that one day by God's grace we will see the Lord in the glory of heaven. As the apostle Paul put it, “Now we see dimly, but then face to face.” [1 Cor.13:12]

But the statement, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God,” also refers to how we can come to see God in the here and now. Mother Teresa once said, “I see God in every human being.” The love of Christ in her heart enabled her to see God in all the needy people around her. Right here there is a key truth—the condition of our heart directly shapes what we will see in the world around us. People whose hearts are full of greed see only things in the world around them that they want to grasp. People whose hearts are full of anger and hate see only enemies in the world around them that they want to strike. People whose hearts are full of faith and love see children of God all around them, and a world which in

endless ways reveals the hand of God.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. When our hearts are directed by Christ, our eyes become open to the glory of God, and how God is leading us to share in His blessing today.