

PURITY OF HEART

We have stressed the necessity of taking the first step first. The first beatitude – the humility stance, the acceptance of our absolute need for God – is not only a life-changing blessing in its own right, but it is prerequisite to all the other beatitudes. The rest of them cannot work right – do not end up in blessing – without the first one already in place. This is important for all of us to keep remembering, but if you are coming into our Lenten theme in the middle, I beg you to at least refer to the first sermon in the series, “Poor In Spirit.”

Our English word “blessed,” or “blessing,” is a powerful term. If you say of someone, “That person has been a real blessing in my life,” that is a strong statement. Nevertheless, I think the word “blessed” (*makarios*) does not carry for us the emotional power intended here. It became popular in the '60s and '70s to translate “blessed” into “happy.” We ran around saying, “Happy are the peacemakers. Happy are the meek.” Kind of like trying to drive a B-17 with the propeller from a beanie cap.

The opposite of blessed is not “unhappy,” though it does move in that direction. The opposite of blessed is “cursed” – blighted, out of the plan, out of the Kingdom. *Makarios* is the distinctive, you-can't-get-it-anywhere-else JOY of participation in God's Kingdom – being in it – being part of it. *Makarios* was often contrasted with a false, temporary, worldly happiness. God effects a reversal of our values. The Beatitudes are far beyond the shallow, temporal rewards of this world. By the way, lots of propaganda notwithstanding, they do not necessarily fight each other. They often coexist. Just because you have good health or a responsible job or considerable financial resources does not automatically mean that you do not love and serve God. But the Beatitudes are beyond the temporal world and its values. The world cannot give them to you. And if God gives them to you, the world cannot take them away. It is one of the saddest and greatest moments of all time: the discovery that our crucifying Jesus did not mean that He was no longer the Son of God.

Spiritual principles are dangerous if they are not dedicated and devoted to God. Nowhere is that more true and clear than with the sixth beatitude. Intensity, focus, and single-minded purpose are at the root of the greatest evil, as well as the greatest good. The SS troops of the Third

Reich had a great deal in common with the Jesuits in their heyday – the devotion and discipline were very similar. The difference was in whom and what they served.

So as we talk about the second greatest of the Beatitudes, let us be particularly mindful of how very dependent it is upon the first, and how dangerous it is without the first. We want to be love-based rather than fear-based, but I do think we should be very fearful of the abuse or misuse of our gifts, and we should teach our children to be too. This is not a common awareness in our society. But it is one of the curses – one of the greatest misfortunes – when we misuse, abuse, or fail to use the gifts that God gives us.

I am not talking about doing anything perfectly. But it is possible to grow up in our culture and get clear through school, and even church, and never be clearly told that one of the greatest misfortunes in life is to use your gifts and abilities for your own purposes – for your own ends. “I did it myself,” “It’s for me,” “I am successful” are relatively common and socially acceptable attitudes.

Do you remember the saying, “Whoever created your intelligence, *you* didn’t”? Well, whoever created your other skills, gifts, or abilities, *you* didn’t. We can train, develop, fine tune, and devote our gifts, but none of them were our idea to start with. So if we are going to talk about purity of heart – the very thing that will bring our gifts to their apex – let us be very clear, lest our gifts become the source of our deepest sorrow and greatest sin. Our gifts were given to us that we may serve God and his Kingdom. If we do not dedicate and devote them to this end, we are in the enemy camp.

God does not appreciate it when we use the gifts he gave us to hurt people, to weaken or oppose his authority, or to do damage to the Kingdom. Sometimes this awareness makes us want to “sit it out,” to make sure we do no harm. But neither does God appreciate it when we let the gifts lie fallow, go unused. Jesus’ parable of the talents is a devastating indictment of trying to play it safe. So we are caught. We have to acknowledge, train, develop, dedicate, and use our abilities – for God – in some way ... or we live blighted, empty, complaint-filled lives.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” The imagery is pretty clear, unless we want to be obtuse – and sometimes, sadly, I do.

I got away with it with some of my teachers in school, and it is hard not to try to pull it off with God. Technically, we could argue that the “heart” is not the center or core of our inner being, that it is not the seat of our motives or emotions. But it has long been used to symbolize these very things. Occasionally I discover after a sermon that I am still speaking to a few literalists – some fundamentalist and some scientific. Anyway, worshipping the Lord your God with all of your heart means more than saying “Thank you” for the blood-pumping muscle that keeps you alive. Not that it is wrong to be thankful for that as well. May both layers of heart-meaning be strong within you.

“Purity” was another one of those special concepts in ancient times. Purity was power. Unmixed with other things, something pure could express the full essence of itself. Purity was wisdom. Untroubled by doubts, mixed motives, or conflicting ideas, it could see clearly, and sometimes far into the future. It was no longer double-minded.

Gold was the first metal that humans learned to make pure. They could smelt it – melt it and keep scraping away all the impurities until they had “pure gold.” You can still feel that phrase crackle inside a little, even if you do not remember why. “It is pure gold.” Why would you want your king to wear a crown of gold? It had nothing to do with wealth or greed. That came later, and is picayune in comparison. You wanted your king to wear a crown of gold so that the properties of purity would transfer from the crown to his head – so that he would have wisdom and power; so that he would see clearly, make just judgments, and be strong – that the kingdom and its people might prosper. Purity was the key. Without purity, what chance could there be? Most of the kings of the earth, despite their crowns, were not pure. We have the devastation to prove it.

Why is a wedding ring – the symbol and seal of the wedding vows – made of gold? Figure it out. Some people have not figured it out yet. They think there is something wrong with marriage, when in fact, unknowingly, they have not yet given it a chance.

“Purity of heart is to will one thing.” Søren Kierkegaard titled one of his books with this phrase. Purity of heart is to will one thing. Jesus said to Martha: “*Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; only one thing is necessary.*” (Luke 10:41) *Blessed are the pure in heart: blessed are you when the will within you – the core and center of your feelings, motives, desires, and purposes – has been smelted: melted*

and processed until all the impurities, all the extraneous stuff, all the secondary goals and desires, good or bad, have been scraped away. When the heart is pure, its only *desire* is to love and serve God. Its only *purpose* is to love and serve God. Integration. All the inner warfare resolved. All parts of the whole working toward the same end.

Then, of course, the pure in heart see more clearly how to love others, and how to engage in many things in this world without the heart wavering from its true purpose. And God backs and supports the gifts with power. From the outside, we watch in amazement and think we are seeing miracles. Mother Teresa was so human we thought she was inhuman. Paul was so focused we could barely believe it. Jeremiah seemed like the purist gold in the Old Testament, but maybe it was because he was handed such a harsh assignment. And Jesus? Was Jesus pure in heart? Whenever I start to realize the magnitude of it – begin to grasp it – I am so overwhelmed, so overcome, that I cannot contain the gratitude, the admiration, the wonder.

Before we leave this brief introduction of the sixth beatitude and you go to your own Lenten contemplation for the rest of the week, I want to remind you of what an important place this imagery had in Jesus' teachings. The Beatitudes bring it to its apex, but Jesus often reminded us of the importance of the heart, and how it controls everything for good or for evil. He was constantly telling us: "You cannot fix it from the outside in. It must be fixed from the inside out." That is why Christianity puts such emphasis on conversion, on being born anew, on being saved, on trusting the Savior. The heart must be changed or none of the rest can follow. Our world is always focused on changing the outside. Naturally. What else would you expect from the world? Christianity is a profound and uncompromising alternative to that approach. First the heart, *then* the deed. If we get to the deed first, Satan will always twist it to a different purpose.

Just a few quotations for those who think I might be exaggerating: "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a man" (Matthew 15:19-20) "For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a man." (Mark 7:21-23) "You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth

speaks. The good man out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil man out of his evil treasure brings forth evil.” (Matthew 12:34-35) “For this people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears are heavy of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should perceive with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and turn for me to heal them.” (Matthew 13:15) “The good man out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil man out of his evil treasure produces evil; for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.” (Luke 6:45)

Why will the pure in heart see God? “*Ask and you will receive. Seek and you will find. Knock and it will be opened unto you.*” (Matthew 7:7) But aside from that – and aside from the next realm – there is something small yet very meaningful to me. I had a friend, years ago, named Lorraine Washburn. Her husband was one of my dearest friends, and I only knew Lorraine because I loved Channing. But one day when I was waiting for Channing to finish up with a patient so we could go play, Lorraine and I got to talking about painting. Now, “art” is one of the things that got left out of my gene pool. My theory is: If you don’t have a camera, you should at least paint it as close to a photograph as possible. Even if you do have a camera, you would be better off reading a book. But Lorraine and I started talking about painting. For a few minutes, we got nowhere. Then she just stopped, and started describing to me what she was seeing outside the window. I thought it was just their backyard, but for a little while Lorraine let me see that backyard through her eyes. It had color and shadow and light and shape and patterns I had never seen or noticed in all my life. Lorraine had devoted years of love and energy to a gift God had given her, and so every day she “saw” a whole world that I looked at but did not see.

The promise of seeing God is a future promise. But it is also true that the pure in heart wake up every morning to a world full of God, a world that bears the marks and traces of God’s presence everywhere. Does that make it worth going through the smelting? We shall see.