

- f. To Jesus' Jewish audience, the "kingdom of God" conjured up images of Israel's earthly exaltation. The coming of the kingdom meant that Israel would once again be the head and not the tail (cf. Deuteronomy 28:1-14; Zechariah 8:1-23); the glory that was David's kingdom would at last be fully realized. The Jews had an earthly conception of God's kingdom – a phenomenon paralleled in all religions. Whatever men believe about an afterlife, they frame it within natural categories, whether Hinduism's reincarnation and nirvana, Buddhism's enlightenment, Islam's sensual paradise, or the common Christian notions of heaven.

For most Christians, their vision of heaven amounts to an idealized version of their own personal sense of "the best of all possible worlds." Heaven is what this world would be if it perfectly satisfied all their sensibilities and expectations. The Bible, however, presents heaven, not as an idealized place but as the presence of God as it touches His creation. Heaven is sacred space: It speaks ultimately to the realization of God's intended relationship with His creation as mediated through divine-human intimacy. Heaven concerns Creator/creature communion centered in the relationship of divine Father and image-son. Thus the reward of the *kingdom of heaven* (5:3, 10) is the reward of *beholding God*, and Jesus promised that reward to the **pure in heart** (5:8; cf. Revelation 21:1-7, 22:1-5).

This beatific quality must be viewed from the same perspective as the others, meaning that, whatever Jesus meant by "purity of heart," it cannot be the property of men in their natural, unregenerate state. No honest individual would take exception to this, for all people are painfully aware that, however "pure" their words and deeds, a principle of impurity and uncleanness resides within their heart. This is true even of the most mature and godly Christian, and this fact (not to mention the deceptions inherent in "natural-mindedness") has often resulted in confusion, misunderstanding and misapplication of Jesus' words.

- The most flagrant is the notion that Jesus was calling men to strive to purify their own hearts with a view to a triumphal entrance into God's presence. Though nuanced, this basic concept marks all religions since it reflects the innate self-righteousness of men in their estranged condition.
- Others, noting the fact that no Christian is truly "pure in heart," find Jesus' association of this quality with His kingdom problematic. It appears one must either relativize His words or not apply them to the present state of the kingdom. In the former instance, many insist that Jesus was affirming only the relative inward purity of the subjects of the kingdom of heaven; their hearts aren't exhaustively pure, but are nonetheless *authentically* pure, having been cleansed from their former corruption.

But where it is concluded that Jesus was referring to absolute purity, interpreters are forced to apply His words to the "life to come." For death alone sees believers purged of all impurity (note that this view seems to be further supported by Jesus' statement that the pure in heart *will* see God).

- Another solution to the above difficulty – one more in keeping with the biblical text – is that Matthew’s Greek adjective denotes *cleanness* rather than purity in the absolute sense. The resulting meaning is that citizens of Christ’s kingdom are marked by inward cleansing, not spotless perfection (cf. John 13:10-11, 15:3; Hebrews 10:21-22; 1 Peter 1:22-23; etc.)
- Still another view is that purity of heart refers to *singleness* of heart. That is, the subjects of the kingdom of heaven are characterized by undistracted, single-minded devotion to God. Their hearts have been liberated from their enslavement to the lusts of their fallen nature to love and serve God in sincerity and truth. Such persons have “pure” hearts in the sense that they no longer have ulterior motives or competing loyalties.

Recognizing that this beatific quality, too, finds its preeminent expression in the Last Adam, heart purity must be understood in terms of man as fully man – man as he obtains his true humanity in Christ. Jesus’ person and work must provide the definition of “pure in heart,” and that leads to the following observations:

- 1) Given man’s comprehensive corruption, purity of heart clearly implies a divine work of *cleansing* (as opposed to effective self-reformation). In this sense, it is biblical to understand a *pure* heart in terms of a *clean* heart.
- 2) Moreover, the Scripture uses the notion of “cleanness” to refer to those things/persons that are suited to be in God’s presence. That which is *sanctified* – set apart to God and His worship and service – must be clean (cf. Genesis 8:20; Leviticus 6:8-11, 7:15-20, 10:8-14, 11:1-15:33; cf. also Psalm 24:1-4 with 18:16-26).
- 3) This ritual cleanness was epitomized in Israel’s priests and their sacrifices; these, in turn, highlighted the principle of *entire devotion*. The priests and Levites were “holy to the Lord” (Exodus 28:36-38; Numbers 18:20; Joshua 18:7), as were their offerings and the implements of their worship. So it was with Israel itself as Yahweh’s elect “son”: Among all the earth’s peoples, Israel alone was set apart to God (Exodus 4:22-23, 19:1-6).

The kingdom of God in its Israelite form was preeminently a kingdom of purity expressed most poignantly in the principle of absolute consecration; the sons of the kingdom and every aspect of their relationship with their covenant Father were “holy to the Lord.” Purity wasn’t merely an ethical obligation; it was the singular ground for entering into God’s presence (ref. again Psalm 24:3-4).

- The hallmark of the Israelite kingdom was Yahweh’s presence in the midst of His people. His Shekinah hovered between the wings of the cherubim in the Holy of Holies, and this sacred throne room was situated in the middle of the covenant nation (cf. Exodus 25:1-8; 40:17-35; cf. also Numbers 14:11-14; Deuteronomy 7:1-21; Isaiah 1:10-12).

- The Lord dwelled with His covenant “son,” but in a manner that highlighted His ongoing estrangement from them. His Shekinah was unseen and inaccessible, cloaked with multiple coverings and separated from the people by a tall barrier. Only the chosen, anointed high priest had access to the divine presence, and then only at a designated time in the context of his own ritual cleansing and purity (Leviticus 16:1-14).
- In the ethic of the Israelite kingdom, access to God was limited to the pure. At the time the covenant relationship was initiated, the whole nation was covenantally “pure” and thus Israel’s elders were able to enter Yahweh’s presence and behold Him without being destroyed (Exodus 24:1-11). After Israel’s subsequent rebellion (Exodus 32:1ff) and Moses’ death (Deuteronomy 34:10), that privilege was reserved for the high priest alone. Entrance into God’s presence had been restricted to one individual, but the requirement of personal purity remained unchanged.

Thus, Jesus’ declaration that the pure in heart are blessed because they alone will see God was no new revelation for His Israelite audience. This had been a foundational ethic of the kingdom from the beginning. The *principle* Jesus articulated wasn’t new; what was new was the matter of its *fulfillment*. The Israelite kingdom ethic demanded purity of those who would enter God’s presence, but this purity never really existed; it was present only symbolically. Ceremonial rituals and washings could cleanse the body of dirt, but not even the sacrificial blood of bulls and goats was able to purge the inner man.

The purity associated with the “time of preparation” was itself preparatory, and therefore *prophetic* and *promissory*: It portrayed and pointed to a time in which the heart purity required for human access to the Most High would be realized in truth. And the Scripture revealed that time to be when Yahweh inaugurated His kingdom in His Servant-King. In that day, He would cleanse the hearts of His people from their defilement by washing them with the living water of His Spirit. And having cleansed their hearts, the Lord would then circumcise them. No longer would His people’s consecration be external and symbolic; in that day He would set them apart to Himself in spirit and in truth (cf. Ezekiel 36:16-29 with Isaiah 4:2-6; also Deuteronomy 10:11-21; 30:1-6; ref. esp. Hebrews 9:1-10:18).

When Jesus proclaimed the blessedness of the pure in heart, He was affirming to His Jewish listeners that the promised kingdom had at last “broken in,” even as its King was now present among them. *But more than that, Jesus was confronting their natural conception of the kingdom.* The Jews had been led to expect a kingdom that would essentially resurrect David’s kingdom. And inasmuch as the purity associated with that kingdom had been external and ceremonial, the same might reasonably be ascribed to its successor. Thus Jesus reminded the multitudes that God had pledged a kingdom of true inward purity that the former Israelite kingdom only anticipated. The shadows were now yielding to the substance, and men must lay hold of that if they intended to enter Messiah’s heavenly kingdom.