



The Heart of the Matter

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This past Friday, my wife, Nancy, and I had a great opportunity at one of our GraceLife Bible studies. Phil Layton invited us to do a Q&A for the people that attend that study so they could get to know us better. Why anyone would want to do that is beyond me, but I just went where I was told to go.

One of the questions that came up dealt with my background as an attorney. I am always slightly amused when people ask about that because a lot of you have difficulty fitting the idea of a Christian attorney into your world view. I understand that.

Someone once said to me, “You must have gone to law school because you wanted to pursue justice.” No. I went to law school because I wanted a Mercedes convertible. That predated my conversion, but at the time that was the defining ambition in my life. I wanted to drive back to a high school reunion and show off to all those people who didn’t vote for me as most likely to succeed.

I wish that was not true, but that was what was in my heart when I went to law school. It was sick. That was the defining ambition of my life.

Ambition is the earnest desire for some kind of achievement or distinction. Ambition is the unifying desire in life which influences everything else that you do. You may not consciously think about your ambition, but even if your ambition is simply to sit on the couch and not be bothered, you gear your life around that ambition.

Some of us have noble ambitions. Some of us perhaps have sinful ambitions. Some of us have worldly ambitions. But all of us have something in our heart that drives us and motivates us.

Ambition acts like a compass and points you in a particular direction. And that could be a good thing if you have the right ambition.

Our beatitude this morning would gather up all of our desires and put them on a single track. It is found in Matthew 5:8. Eleven words in English; it takes a lifetime to master them.

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

If you have been with us for our study of the Beatitudes over the past many weeks, you know that we dealt with some pretty searching material. We dealt with words straight from the lips of the Lord Jesus Christ that probe and poke and prod at the deepest levels of our hearts in light of the presence of God.

And so when we talked about being poor in spirit, when we talked in verse 4 about mourning over our sins and the meekness that it produces in verse 5 and the deep, profound hunger and thirst for righteousness that Jesus explained in verse 6, we have all felt the sting of the conviction of the Holy Spirit—at least those of us that are saved couldn't help but feel some manner of conviction over that.

There is a certain negative element to those beatitudes in the sense that they force us to look at our sinfulness and come to grips with it. We are not all that we should be. We do not measure up to that perfection of Christian character as Jesus not only taught us but as he lived it out. We were and are, I trust, humbled before that.

That is the effect that it is supposed to have on you. If you felt that sting of conviction, praise God because Jesus says you are blessed. You are in a position of being approved by God because that is exactly what he wants from the hearts of his people.

The Beatitudes force us to recognize our sin and repent of it. They force us to realize that even our repentance is shallow and tainted. Yet despite those “negative” reactions, we are encouraged because Jesus said that is what he wants, so we give praise to the Lord Jesus Christ and to his glorious Holy Spirit who is working those things in our hearts. It is when you are responding to those things that you should be most encouraged.

If you could sit under the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount and be indifferent to it, you have a much deeper problem than anyone who mourns over it.

But as we move into Matthew 5:8, we are moving into a positive dimension of the Beatitudes. We are moving into the goal of spiritual life and the ambition that should animate us. We have a positive goal to pursue. And so it is a glorious corner that we are turning. You just have to love the genius of the mind of God that understands that it is not just the negative things that we need to deal with, but we also need that positive spiritual goal to pursue. That is what we have before us this morning.

This is an immense verse. One sermon is not adequate to deal with it. One writer said about Matthew 5:8:

Anyone who realizes even something of the meaning of the words “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” can approach them only with a sense of awe and complete inadequacy. This statement has engaged the attention of God’s people ever since it was first uttered and many great volumes have been written in an attempt to expound it. In spite of all that has been written and preached, it still eludes us. Our best plan perhaps is just to try to grasp something of its central meaning and emphasis.

That's what we are going to do today—just to try to grasp a little bit of the central meaning and emphasis in this verse. This verse spans into all of eternity, everything you ever think about, anything that ever motivates you, anything you ever say, anything that you ever do. This is a lifetime verse with eternal implications. The glory of it is astounding.

The thought of trying to explain it to you in 40 minutes has just overwhelmed me and left me with very little to know what to say. So we will try to grab onto something that would point us in the right direction and trust the Spirit of God to move us even further.

This verse is an enormous encouragement to every one of you that has felt the sting of these prior beatitudes. It is an enormous encouragement to every one of you that is ever resisted sin. It is an enormous encouragement for every one of you that desires righteousness and wants to pursue God with all of your heart even if you fall short (and every one of us does). So let's approach it with three points in mind today. First point being this:

1. The Necessity of a Pure Heart

In Matthew 5:8 here, Jesus makes an exclusive statement. Every statement in the Beatitudes is exclusive. Every one is emphatic. When he says, "theirs is the kingdom of heaven," "they shall be comforted," "they shall be satisfied," every one of those statements is emphatic.

You could understand the original language to say in every one of these verses that these people *and these people alone* will know the fulfillment of the promise of the beatitude. It is a completely exclusive statement. These are not statements that are meant for anyone in the world. These statements are limited in scope. They are targeted in their audience. They are limited to those who have taken up the cross of Christ and have started to pursue him in a life of holiness.

Jesus says here in verse 8 that the pure in heart *and only the pure in heart* will see God. Everyone else will be lost in their sins to face an eternity of destruction in the lake of fire. But for those of you that know Christ, this is a profoundly rich verse in all that it says.

So this matter of pure at heart is extremely vital. It is the dividing line between heaven and hell, the dividing line between blessing and curse and came straight from the lips of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Other scriptures confirm this. This is a common theme in the Bible and one of the things that we have seen as we have studied the Beatitudes together is that Jesus is simply expounding on themes we see elsewhere in the Bible.

Psalm 24 says:

Who may ascend into the hill of the Lord? And who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not lifted up his soul to falsehood and has not sworn deceitfully. He shall receive a blessing from the Lord and righteousness from the God of his salvation.

In the New Testament we see similar themes echoed. Hebrews 12:14 says:

Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord.

And so a pure heart is indispensable to seeing God. It is fundamental to fellowship with him. God is holy and only those who share in that holiness can be in his presence. It is utterly, utterly necessary. And we know from elsewhere in the scripture that the only way that you can ever obtain that perfect righteousness that is required to stand in his presence is if God gives it to you in the Lord Jesus Christ. Only if Christ's righteousness is imputed to you through faith in him can you ever have the standing to be before God.

That's the starting point although it is not the central focus of the meaning of this verse, but that is the starting point of it. And so purity of heart is absolutely essential. Spiritual life does not happen apart from this principle.

2. The Meaning of a Pure Heart

What does it mean to have a pure heart? The idea of purity here refers to something that is unmixed. It can refer to clear water or metals that do not have any impurities in them. Something that is free from contaminants, free from foreign elements. That's the idea of purity.

When Jesus talks about pure in heart, it is a very, very expansive idea. I realize that for some people, especially young people who come out of student ministries or things like that, when you think of the idea of purity, you tend to think about it in terms of sensual matters. Abstaining from sexual sin. That is perhaps included in this idea, but that is far too narrow. What Jesus is saying goes so far beyond that because what Jesus has in mind here it is absolutely comprehensive.

Now the heart, as you know, refers to the center of your personality; the core of your being. The heart is the center of your thoughts, your emotions, the way you think, and the way you decide issues. The heart refers to the totality of your inner man.

So when Jesus says that you have to be pure in your inner man, realize that this is such a thoroughly expansive idea that we couldn't begin to comprehend it in 40 minutes. This takes a lifetime to work itself out in your thinking. It is in your inner man, it is in your heart, it is in your thoughts and your emotions, in your will and in your reasoning that you have to be completely pure and free from all contaminants.

Psalm 86 helps us express this idea a little bit. I invite you to turn there as we look at these two verses. These are not the most familiar verses in the Bible, but they are very helpful for this idea of having a united single focus in your heart that is free from all distractions. Psalm 86:11 says:

Teach me your way, O Lord; I will walk in your truth. Unite my heart to fear your name.

Pull together all of the distractions. Eliminate everything that is sinful and unite my heart so that it has a single minded focus on fearing your name. Verse 12:

I will give thanks to you, O Lord my God, with all my heart and will glorify your name forever.

This call to a pure heart is a call to a united heart—one that is fully and exclusively devoted to the glory of God. One that walks in his truth. One that fears his name wholly and completely.

This beatitude beloved, is about a thoroughgoing character that has an undistracted devotion to God and Christ. A pure heart, no impurities, single minded, devoted to the glory of God. That's the idea. In 1 Corinthians 10:31, Paul said:

Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

That's the idea. To be pure in heart is to have a heart that is united on a single focus of devotion to the glory of God.

Now in one sense that's simple enough. But of course there are a couple of problems that stand in the way with that.

Problem #1: You were born with a corrupt heart.

Jeremiah 17:9:

The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick, who can understand it?

A call to a pure heart and yet my heart is defective. If only there could be a recall on it, I would send it back. Jesus said in Matthew 15 that it is out of the heart that come evil thoughts and murders and adulteries, thefts and false witness and slanders. Even as believers, we carry the remnants of that with us. And so how do we ever have a pure heart under those circumstances?

And the problem is a little more complicated even than that.

Problem #2: You cannot fix your own heart.

Proverbs 20:9:

Who can say I have cleansed my heart, I am pure from my sin?

The obviously implied answer is no one can say that.

So while we have this glorious call of the pure heart laid out before us, comprehensive in all of its scope, we see that we don't have a pure heart to offer. What do we say to that?

Beloved, as great and as blessed as this beatitude is, it immediately brings us right back to the starting point of the Sermon on the Mount. We are bankrupt. Our spirit is impoverished. We do not have pure hearts on our own and we cannot produce it on our own.

So we are left to look for a purity that is outside of us. Every one of you falls short of the glory of God. And so we have to find that purity somewhere else. And it is only in the new birth. It is only in conversion. It is only in salvation. When God saves a sinner and gives him a new heart that is tender to the things of holiness, then we can ever begin to see the fulfillment of these verses. Jesus told Nicodemus, "Unless you are born again, you cannot see the kingdom of heaven."

And so perfection is the ultimate standard, but we need Christ to give it to us. And the point where we are leading in all of this is that the presence of the Spirit of God in your life working out the purposes of God in your life is necessary and inevitable. It is the purifying process of sanctification that is the goal and the desire in the heart of every true believer. That starts to get us to the point of understanding what Jesus is talking about here.

So when we talk about purity of heart, here is what we mean: Purity of heart is that undistracted devotion to God that begins at salvation and flows into a single minded, sincere following of Christ and transparency before men.

Commenting on this principle, John Stott in his great book on the Sermon on the Mount said:

The one who is pure in heart in his relations both with God and men is free from falsehood. The one who is pure in heart is utterly sincere. His whole life, public and private, is transparent before God and men. He hates hypocrisy and deceit.

Hypocrisy is the ultimate enemy of purity in heart as Jesus defines it here. And beloved, to the extent that there is a gap between the way that you are on Sunday morning and the way that you live during the rest of the week is the extent to which your heart is not yet thoroughly pure. To the extent that there is a gap between the way that you act and the face that you put on before men and what you think in your heart is the extent to which you lack this purity of heart that Jesus is calling us to.

You and I still sin and will still fall short of the glory of God. Now does that mean that none of us are pure in heart as Jesus means it here? Will none of us ever see God? We need to understand how to deal with those remaining impurities to be able to pursue what Jesus has in mind here.

How do we address that gap in purity that is in our life? How do we address that gap of lingering hypocrisy and lingering sin? Where do we go to deal with that when we hate it? And we detest the fact that sin still clings to us and we want to be rid of it, but it hangs on like barnacles to our soul? Where do you go?

Psalm 51 leads us to the right place. You don't have to be an adulterer or a murderer to need the words that David penned here in Psalm 51 after his sin with Bathsheba, after he abused power and had her husband murdered on the lines of the battlefield. The people that are truly pure in heart as Jesus defines it here are the people that understand the spirit of what David says in the passage that I am about to read. Look at what David says in Psalm 51:6:

Behold, you desire truth in the innermost being and in the hidden part you will make me know wisdom. Purify me with hyssop and I shall be clean. Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow. Make me to hear joy and gladness. Let the bones that you have broken rejoice. Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

This passage emphasizes the inward nature of the cleansing that we all still need from sin. Beloved, as David prays here, this is the model that you should pursue as you desire purity of heart.

The one who is pure in heart is not someone who is free from all sin. The apostle John teaches us that in 1 John 1 that anyone who claims to be without sin is a liar and the truth is not in him. So purity in heart must mean something else. Jesus calls us to that heart attitude that freely and unconditionally acknowledges your sin and appeals to God to cleanse your heart in the way that you are incapable of doing yourself.

It is tied in with that brokenness of spirit that says, God, I appeal to you alone for the cleanness of heart that I need and you require. That is my desire, Father, even though I fall short of it.

As you make that appeal as a New Testament believer, you cling like a lifeline to the words of the apostle John in 1 John 1:7:

And the blood of Jesus His son cleanses us from all sin.

This purity of heart that Jesus calls us to is not a spiritual attainment of your own. Like salvation, it is a gift that you receive by faith. It expresses itself in your hunger and thirst

for righteousness. You pursue purity with all of your heart. Every fiber of your being strains after purity. And still, when it is all said and done, you recognize that your efforts are not enough and you trust God and the atoning work of Jesus Christ to perfect you in the way that God himself requires.

A pure heart is one that is at war with sin. A pure heart tolerates no hypocrisy or inconsistency. It recognizes sin and acknowledges it but never lives in a comfortable truce with it. Sin and hypocrisy should be your sworn, spiritual enemy. You take every fiber of being and every power in your heart to fight against it. And you call upon God to help you in that process. And you trust him to be faithful to his promise when he says:

Whoever confesses his sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

You pour everything that you have in it, but you don't do that in a boastful, proud way. You do it because that is what you want. That is your ambition. D. A. Carson said:

The true Christian is not yet perfect. But he is concerned with purity because he recognizes that the king is pure and the kingdom in its perfected form will admit only purity.

So that's the meaning of purity of heart. We realize that we are imperfect. I know that you are imperfect. If you read your Bible, you can know that I am imperfect. But that's not what Jesus is talking about here. It goes beyond. In a sense it goes beyond perfection. It searches like a spotlight the innermost recesses of your heart and life.

I would go so far to say that even if there was no reward at the end of the tunnel for us, the pure in heart would desire this anyway. They desire purity because of its own inherent worth. What Jesus lays out in the Beatitudes is the highest and the noblest and the greatest aspiration that any human heart could ever have. Even though we cannot pursue that in our own strength, we recognize the value of it because the value of the character of the beatitude is what was expressed by the mind of God. It is what the character of God requires.

So even if there was no reward for pursuing this kind of life, the pure in heart would pursue it anyway because of the great value of what Jesus describes here. But there is a reward.

3. The Reward for a Pure Heart

We talked about the necessity of the pure heart, the meaning of the pure heart and now the reward for a pure heart. And never have I felt smaller in a pulpit than I do right now knowing what we are about to discuss.

Look at the end of verse 8. Jesus says:

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

The word that Jesus uses for “see” here is the word for physical sight. It is also used for mental perception. You can see a mountain with your eyes. With your mind you can see the answer to a math problem. One is visible; one is invisible. But the same verb is used to describe both physical and mental experience. So you can see with mental comprehension and you can see with physical sight. Jesus has both ideas in mind here.

a. In Creation

First of all scripture tells us that even in this life we see God in creation. Psalm 19:1 says:

The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of his hands.

The true believer can see this. The hymn writer said:

*Heaven above is softer blue
Earth around is sweeter green
Something lives in every hue
Christless eyes have never seen.*

That hymn writer understood this point. When he was born again, he saw the world through different vision. He had different glasses on. All of the sudden, he saw God everywhere that he turned in the beauty of every flower, in the glory of every sunset, he saw the hand of God written all over it.

That’s the way it is for the pure in heart. They understand the grandeur of the sovereignty of God and the grandeur of his control over the universe. They see his glory and his beauty expressed in everything around them.

b. In the Scriptures

They also see God in the scriptures. The true believer understands that this is the word of God. There is no disputing over whether this is inspired or not to the true believer. He just knows. Paul in 1 Corinthians 2 talks about this. One of the things that God gives to his children is a love for the word of God and submission to it. Someone who doesn’t see God in the Scriptures is not a believer.

Jesus said in John chapter 5:39:

You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life. It is these that testify about me.

The Scriptures point us to Christ. The true believer knows that. The true believer sees God revealed in the scriptures.

c. In Glory

But the ultimate fulfillment of this verse lies beyond even the grandeur of those things. The ultimate fulfillment of this is going to be when we are in glory. In creation, in the scriptures we see God, but in glory we are going to see him with physical sight and Jesus' prayer in John 17:24 will be fulfilled. Jesus prays to the Father. Do you think the Father answers Jesus' prayers? I do. He said:

Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, be with me where I am, so that they may see my glory which you have given me.

Those that are pure in heart are going to be the answer to Jesus' prayer in John 17. Those of us that know Christ are going to stand before him and we are going to see him in his glory.

You say, "What does that mean?" I have no idea. How can the finite see the infinite? What is it like to see inexpressible glory? There is nothing in our experience that we can compare this to. But whatever it means it is going to be fabulously, gloriously great.

Revelation 22:4 says: "They will see his face." The apostle John in 1 John 3:2 says:

We know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.

And beloved, here is the defining ambition, here is the driving force, here is the ultimate culmination that is the heart of the matter for everything about being a true Christian, whatever the bumps and bruises are that we sustain along the road of life. The ultimate outcome is standing face-to-face with the Lord Jesus Christ and seeing him in all of his glory. That is a thought that no man is really worthy to talk of because it is just so staggering. It takes us beyond everything we have ever known—to a heavenly realm that is reserved for the pure in heart and for them alone.

When that day comes, beloved, you are going to be transfigured into another condition if you know Christ. You will share in his holiness and in some manner his resurrected glory. And it will be that way forever. If you are here today as a believer in Christ, that is your destiny. It is unspeakably great.

But, reservations only. It is reserved for the pure in heart. If you don't love the pursuit of purity in heart now, you will not enjoy that vision then. Yours will be in another part. Martyn Lloyd-Jones puts it this way:

Do you know that you are destined to see him as he is? Blessed, glorious vision to see the Son of God in all his glory as he is, face to face. You, standing and

looking at him, enjoying him for all eternity. You and I are destined for that vision glorious. We shall see him as he is, face to face.

Now beloved, we could spend weeks trying to work out the implications of it. But let me just leave you with one thought. This beatitude tells you, you should take this and meditate on it when you are discouraged in your struggle with sin. This beatitude tells you that your pursuit of holiness and your struggle against sin is worth it. Whatever the difficulties of your Christian life and living for Christ are in this world, as you pursue that purity in heart and you pursue that life of holiness, it is worth it.

And even if you are not so sure about that now, let me assure you that when you stand face to face with Christ, all doubt will vanish about that fact and you will rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory. Such is the goodness of God for his children. Such is the glory that he has stored up for those that love him.

If you are here and you are not Christian, you need to trust Christ. You need to repent of your sin and come to him in faith so that promise could be yours.

I will bring you back to earth and close with this question: What is there in your life that distracts you from unhindered devotion to God? In light of the greatness of the promise that Jesus makes to those who love purity of heart, I will just tell you this: Kill it, slay it, cut it off. It is not worth it. Set it aside and know even more fully that great joy that God reserves for the pure in heart.

Let's pray:

Father, the apostle Paul said that he had this one ambition, to be pleasing to you. May that be our single desire. May that be our one ambition, Father. May you sustain us as we look to that unspeakably great reward.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

This transcript was prepared by Shari Main.