



Blessed are the Pure in Heart

St. Matthew 5:8

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Jesus gives us our next Beatitude in Matthew 5:8:

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

I'd like to tackle this one differently than I have the others. We've been looking first at the conditions in each case, and *then* the blessing that God promises. But this time I want to look at the blessing first; in this case: "for they shall see God."

What does it mean to "see God"? In the context of what Jesus is saying here, it means to be in the presence of God. And to be in the presence of God, I think we would all agree, is a wonderful and awesome thing. But do we really understand what it means to be in the presence of God, because if we really understand that we'll really be able to understand what it means to be "pure in heart" – and why the two necessarily go together.

You see, I think that we often have a very shallow understanding of what it means to be in the presence of God. I'd never given this much thought. When I thought of being in God's presence I thought, like a lot of people do of having a "happy-happy-joy-joy" or a "warm-fuzzy" experience. And then one day as I was praying through a passage from the Psalms, I was suddenly overwhelmed with a feeling of the presence of God. In that instant I threw myself prostrate on the floor – almost involuntarily – as the words of the Great Litany gushed out of my mouth: "Remember not, Lord, our offences, nor the offences of our forefathers; neither take thou vengeance of our sins: Spare us, good Lord, spare thy people, whom thou hast redeemed with thy most precious blood, and be not angry with us for ever." That confession brought a feeling of peace, but it was a peace with an awesome and fearful presence of the Divine. It wasn't warm and fuzzy. It wasn't a shallow "happy-

happy-joy-joy" moment, but I found that the only response I could give was one of praise of the Almighty saying the *Gloria Patri*.

And as I thought the experience through over the week that followed I realised that my experience wasn't weird – it was in fact the response of those in Scripture who saw God or had an experience of his presence. Think of Isaiah who threw himself down in the presence of God confessing that he was a man of unclean lips and of a people of unclean lips. Ezekiel's experience was very similar. God spoke through Isaiah saying that one day, "Every knee shall bow." That's the experience of the presence of God – that even those who have rejected God will have no choice but to bow before his awesome presence.

But I don't think that's the kind of experience we typically seek on our own. We want the warm-fuzzy and happy-happy-joy-joy. I was prompted to do my own Scripture study on this subject and couldn't find any place where the happy-warm-fuzzy experience happened. But that's what we go looking for. In fact you don't even hear much about that sort of experience in church history until the 19th Century when American revivalists, like Charles Finney, got the idea to use music to get people worked up to the point that they'd "feel" God's presence and be moved to conversion. But that's not God's presence – it's emotional manipulation. And in a very real sense it's a form of idolatry. Instead of looking for the experience of God that's described in Scripture we look for an experience of our own making – an experience that fits how *we* think the presence of God should be.

As a case study, think of Exodus 32. That's where we read about what the Israelite were doing while Moses was upon the top of Mt. Sinai for forty days and nights receiving the Law. Moses had been gone for a long time and the people feared they had lost their leader, so they went to Aaron and demanded that he "make gods" for them. And so Aaron took their jewellery and made the infamous golden calf that Moses found them dancing around and worshipping when he came down from the mountain. Here's what I think a lot of people miss in that story. When they made the golden calf, the people weren't meaning or intending to worship another god. Their

intent was to worship the God of their fathers who had led them out of Egypt. The problem was that they were looking for him in the wrong place, because they had, in a sense, reinvented or redefined him according to their own terms. The ironic thing is that the real presence of God was there in plain sight, in the dark clouds, lightening, and thunder surrounding the mountain, but the people were afraid of that awesome manifestation of his greatness. So they turned their backs on God, and remade him according to their own ideas of what was comfortable for them. Instead of worshipping him in all his holy presence there on the mountain, they were afraid of his presence and made a non-threatening golden image to worship and ask favours from. They turned away from the real image with all of its manifestation of might, and power, and greatness, and holiness. They turned away from the holy God who condemns sin. They should have been driven to their knees, hiding their faces from the perfect and condemning holiness of God. But instead they remade God the way they wanted him. A God who didn't care about their sin or about their spiritual well-being. They went looking for a false, feel-good experience of his presence. They were all dancing around that calf having emotional spiritual highs, asking God for all the things they wanted, and probably feeling pretty good about everything – no doubt believing really and truly that they were in God's presence and hoping that every time they came to worship his likeness in that gold calf, that they'd have that same spiritual high again.

In contrast, when Moses came down from the mountain, having been allowed to see just the *slightest* part of God's presence while shielded in a crevice in the rocks, those same people cowered in fear because the glory of God was reflected and shining from Moses' face. God's presence was so awesome that it had left Moses' face glowing. The people freaked out and were afraid. And that was only the afterglow of the reflection of God's presence – not the real thing.

You see, everyone wants to see God – to be in his presence. The problem is that we either forget or we don't understand what it means to be in the presence of his perfect holiness, righteousness, and purity. It's an overwhelming experience. The Israelites wanted to be in his presence as long as they could define what that

presence was, but once they encountered his real presence and on his terms their only reaction was to cower from it in fear. We often do the same thing as we make an idol – a false image of God in our minds based on what we'd like, rather than who God really is. If you don't believe me, think about how people respond when you share the God of the Bible with them. They'll disagree with you and say, "Well, my god..." We remake God in our image and in ways that make us feel good! That's idolatry! And we do it because we want to see God, but we want to come into his presence on our own terms. And since we can't come into his the presence of the God of Holy Scripture as we are, we remake him as we want him to be – a god who is less than God – an idol.

To truly be in the presence of God is to be fully aware of his perfect righteousness and holiness and our own sinfulness. It's to be reminded that without the righteousness of Christ covering us, we stand before him condemned to eternal damnation. It's to be reminded that we can never look on his perfection without first being pure ourselves and that the impure can never enter his presence. And so Jesus tells us here, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

This is what David was getting at when he wrote in Psalm 24:

**Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?
And who shall stand in his holy place?
He who has clean hands and a pure
heart, who does not lift up his soul to
what is false, and does not swear
deceitfully.** (Psalm 24:3-4)

And David understood the kind of purity that God wants in his people. He prayed, "Thou desirest truth in the *inward being*; therefore teach me wisdom in my *secret heart*" (Psalm 51:6) and "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit *within* me" (Psalm 51:10). He knew that what God wanted was an inward purity – an inner desire for personal holiness, not just outward forms. A lot of what Jesus has to say in the Sermon on the Mount countered the popular religious ideas of the day, like those of the Pharisees. But men and women haven't changed in two thousand years – the spiritual problems of the First Century are the spiritual problems of the Twenty-first. Jesus condemned the

Pharisees for observing only the externals of religion when he said:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you cleanse the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of extortion and rapacity....you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. (Matthew 23:25, 27)

Scripture tells us, that the heart is wicked and deceitful. Jeremiah wrote, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt" (Jeremiah 17:9). And Jesus reminds us that our unregenerate heart is the source of all our problems. He said, "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). The Pharisees tried to mask over their impure inner selves with a veneer, a whitewash of good works.

You see, it's not that God doesn't want us to show an outward righteousness. It's that he wants that outer righteousness to be the by-product of an inner heart-righteousness. He doesn't want us to beautify ourselves on the outside to disguise the ugliness on the inside. He wants inner beauty that shows through on the outside. He wants our righteousness to be real and through and through, not just a thin veneer.

What does real righteousness – real purity – look like? We spell it out every week as hear Jesus' summary of the Law: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." We are to love God with our totality of being. It's not just our emotions. It's not just our intellect. It's not just our outward actions – it's all those things rolled together as who we are in whole. The Greek word that St. Matthew uses 5:8 for "pure" doesn't just mean "clean" or "undefiled;" it also means to be "single-minded." So to be pure in heart is not only to be clean or undefiled, it means that the desire of our heart toward inner purity is focussed on that one thing – that our loyalties aren't divided and that we seek after it with our heart, soul, mind, and strength – with all our being.

Our problem is that while we desire to be pure, and while we desire to be holy, we don't *wholly* desire to be pure, and we don't *wholly* desire to be holy. We're glad to find salvation in Christ, we want to follow his example, but we also don't want to give up all the sinful things in life that give us satisfaction. We want his salvation, but we only want to give up what we have to, and we only want to commit ourselves to those things that are absolutely necessary. If we think we can get to heaven without something, we'll try. This is the great danger of a Church that teaches what Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace." Grace is *free*, but to be effective it can't be *cheapened*. Jesus can't be our saviour unless we *also* make him our Lord and Master. Our problem is that our hearts are divided. Sure we'll give up the sins that are easy to give up and that we won't miss that much, but we hold onto others – especially the ones that no one else has to know about. David prayed, "Teach me thy way, O LORD, that I may walk in thy truth; *unite my heart* to fear thy name" (Psalm 86:11). David struggled with the same problem that we do. He struggled with divided loyalties, wanting to follow God, but also wanting to serve himself – not entirely letting go of sin. This is the great struggle that we all face, including St. Paul. He describes it in Romans 7:

We know that the law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. So then it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. (Romans 7:14-20)

Our struggle with in is a daily struggle. Our duty is to daily keep up the fight. But there are many people who call themselves Christians who give up the battle instead of fighting. They claim to have made Jesus their saviour, but they keep on living the way they did before. We have a churchy term for them: "Carnal Christians." And yet how can we claim to

be a Christian and completely blow off Jesus' call to purity – this call to personal holiness. Jesus says, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” Purity is the *one* thing necessary for us to see God and to enter his presence. If we blow it off, what we're really saying is that we don't care to see God. At best we're acting like the Israelites did as they danced around that golden calf, trying to enter the presence of God on their own terms. But what they've really done in the process is to remake God according to their own false view of him – to give up their Creator and replace him with an idol of their own making. The Israelites literally made a golden idol, but we do the same thing spiritually every time we cheapen who God is by expecting to be able to come into his presence, to see him, without pursuing the personal purity of heart that he demands from us. The writer of Hebrews tells us, “Strive for...the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14).

Fooling ourselves, making a false god who tolerates our half-hearted desire for purity is a dangerous thing. St. John tells us, “God is light and in him is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). We can't call ourselves pure and yet still be committed, even a little bit, to darkness and sin. We can never expect to bring even the tiniest bit of darkness into the perfect light of God's heavenly throne room – if we do the only thing we can expect is his holy judgement.

We need to examine ourselves and ask things like: What do I think about when I'm not preoccupied with other things? What goes through my mind when I put it in neutral? How much dishonesty am I willing to put up with? If I can get away with a little dishonesty here or there, will I? How do I respond to the typical “office humour”? What things command my obedience? What do I want more than anything else in the world? What or whom do I love? Are the things I'm involved in and the things I say a true reflection of what's in my heart? How much of what I say and do is just an outward mask that I wear to make me look like Jesus even when I'm not much like him inside?

In light of the knowledge of just how far short we fall of God's standard, we can thank him that he has sent his Son to be

righteousness for us. Thank him that because of Jesus Christ, when he looks at you he sees not your lack of purity, but the perfect purity of his Son. And yet what Christ has given us of himself, we need to really and truly cultivate in our lives by the power of the Holy Spirit, who lives in us. Because of the cross, we can enter God's presence and stand uncondemned. But it's precisely because we can enter his presence that we should also be fully aware of his righteous standard and out of joyful gratitude for what he's done for us, our greatest desire in life should be to conform ourselves to his holy standard.

That's God's expectation. St. Paul reminds us that “he who began a good work in [us] will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6). And this should give us hope in our daily fight against sin, because it assures us that God's desire is to see us purified, and if he's here to help us, he'll always give us all the help we need. But we also need to remember that God's work requires our cooperation. As much as God does the work, St. James also reminds us that we have our part. He says, “Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you men of double mind” (James 4:8). It's two-sided. God calls us to wash our hands, but at the same time we're also told that “God is at work in [us], both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13). St. John gives us the assurance that what God has started he will finish. He tells us, “Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, *but we know that when he appears we shall be like him*, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2).

Jesus' purity test is this: Do you see God? Too many people come to worship on Sunday looking for an emotional experience of God that they lack during the week – as if somehow they'll receive a sense of his presence here when they haven't had a sense of his presence all week. If that's what you're doing stop and take some time to think about being pure in heart – about loving God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength – and about loving your neighbour as yourself. Think about where you fall down on the job of stamping out sin in your life. And not just purging sinful behaviours, but putting on righteous ones in their place. If we're right with God and spending the

other six days of the week serving him outside these walls, then there's no need to come here seeking a sense of his presence – we'll be living in that presence all week and will bring it with us. True worship is to love and serve God. What we do on Sunday mornings is the culmination of a week's worth of that true worship. That's Jesus' standard of purity.

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, you are perfectly holy, perfectly pure. In your presence there can be no darkness. Renew us with your grace and fill us with your Spirit, turning our hearts wholly to you. Purify us as you are pure and make us holy as you are holy. Keep your awesome presence always in our sight, but give us purity of heart, so that we may enter your presence, not under divine judgement, but as your friends whom you have restored to your fellowship; through Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. Amen.