

Truth for Today

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The Beatitudes in the Modern World: The Blessing of Purity

Over the last two weeks we have been studying the Beatitudes, which are the blessings that the Lord Jesus pronounced on people of certain characters. They are written down for us in Matthew 5:1-12. They form part of what is often known as the "Sermon on the Mount" (Matthew 5:1-7:29). Let's remind ourselves by reading these verses. "And seeing the multitudes, He [that is, the Lord Jesus] went up on a mountain, and when He was seated His disciples came to Him. Then He opened His mouth and taught them, saying: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.'" (Matthew 5:1-12).

Today, we are looking at Matthew 5:8: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God". What can we learn from this one verse?

To start with, let's remind ourselves about the Beatitudes as a whole. We need to appreciate that the Beatitudes apply to us right now, because they show that we live in an imperfect and wicked world - otherwise the Lord Jesus would not have spoken about those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, and those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. So we can see that the Beatitudes are very relevant to us. They also show us that we can be happy in spite of our circumstances. In each case, the Lord Jesus says "Blessed are ...", and 'blessed' can be translated as 'happy'. Now some of the circumstances I have just spoken about don't sound very happy - like being persecuted for righteousness' sake, for example. But the Lord Jesus says that people suffering such things are 'blessed'. Blessedness is therefore possible for the believer in Jesus, even if our circumstances are very difficult. Another helpful point is that the characteristics listed in the Beatitudes are the characteristics of our Lord Jesus Himself. If we want to see the best example of these characteristics, we can look at Him, and at His life.

So how do we understand the sixth Beatitude, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God"? We first need to think about what it means to be "pure in heart". Then, we need to consider what it means to "see God".

The Bible uses the word 'heart' to speak about the centre of ourselves - the source of our thoughts, desires, and intentions. A well known verse that speaks of the heart is Romans 10:9, where the Apostle Paul tells us that we should confess with our mouth that Jesus is Lord, and that we should believe in our heart that God raised the Lord Jesus from the dead. Actually, the Bible has rather a lot to say about our hearts. There are many verses that show us very clearly that we are born into this world with anything but pure hearts. For example, look at Matthew 15:18-19: "But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies." In the Old Testament, in Jeremiah 17:9, we read a terrible description of the human heart: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?"

If our human hearts are wicked and impure, God, on the other hand, is the God of perfect purity. Still in the Old Testament, this time in Habakkuk 1:13, we read this about God: "You are of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look at wickedness". Here then is a problem - we have human hearts that are deceitful and desperately wicked, whereas our God is holy, and He cannot have anything to do with sin. The answer to this, as we know, is in the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. He suffered for our sins on the cross, and He gives us a new life. 1 Corinthians 1:30 tells us that "But of Him [that is, God] are you in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God - and righteousness and sanctification and redemption". The Lord Jesus is our righteousness and sanctification.

But what does it mean on a day-to-day basis to have a pure heart? In his notes on Matthew 5:8, Albert Barnes says that those who are pure in heart are those whose minds, motives and principles are pure. People with pure hearts don't just have their external actions correct. Remember that whereas man looks at the outward appearance, God looks at the heart (1 Samuel 16:7). It's always possible to appear to do the right thing, but to be impure inside. A

good illustration of this is when the Lord Jesus was asked whether it was right to pay taxes to Caesar or not. Let's read in Matthew 22:15-22: "Then the Pharisees went and plotted how they might entangle Him in His talk. And they sent to Him their disciples with the Herodians, saying, 'Teacher, we know that You are true, and teach the way of God in truth; nor do You care about anyone, for You do not regard the person of men. Tell us, therefore, what You think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?' But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, 'Why do you test Me, you hypocrites? Show me the tax money.' So they brought Him a denarius. And He said to them, 'Whose image and inscription is this?' They said to Him, 'Caesar's.' And He said to them, 'Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.' When they had heard these words, they marveled, and left Him and went their way." We can picture the scene. The folk who came to the Lord Jesus probably looked and spoke respectfully, and made it look as though they were asking a serious, legitimate question, eager to know the right answer. But the Lord Jesus saw through their hypocrisy, and exposed it. This was not a question asked out of a pure heart.

As I say, the situation we have just considered was one of downright hypocrisy. But there are plenty of other ways in which our hearts can be impure. As FB Meyer reminds us, our imagination can lead us into much impurity, although no-one else may know of it. One of the most helpful, practical tips I heard was a comment on 1 Peter 1:13, "gird up the loins of your mind". I can't remember who wrote or said it, but the comment was something like this. In New Testament times, many people would have worn long, flowing clothes. If some active work was needed to be done, the flowing garments would have to be gathered in and tucked in at the belt - hence "girding the loins" - so that the clothes didn't get in the way. In the same way, our thoughts can flow off in all sorts of directions, just like a flowing garment. The direction they are flowing in may not be pure or helpful. We need to gird up our minds - gather the thoughts in, and stop them flowing off in unhelpful directions. The English Standard Version translation says "preparing your minds for action", which is a good way of expressing the idea that I have just been speaking about. We can ask for God's help to replace unhelpful thoughts with ones from the list in Philippians 4:8: "whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy - meditate on these things."

The idea of keeping our thoughts and imagination pure is probably one of the most important ways of having a pure heart. In the Old Testament in Proverbs 23:7, we read the following: "For as he thinks in his heart, so is he." This verse is actually about a deceitful miser, who invites you to eat, but really is not your friend at all. But in a general sense the comment that "as he thinks in his heart, so is he" is something that can be applied very widely. What we think about really does have an impact on what we are like as men and women, and whether we have a pure heart. To go back to what the Lord Jesus said in Matthew 15:19 "For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies." Impure deeds have their origin in an impure heart. On the other hand, pure deeds have their origin out of a pure heart.

So we have considered what it means to have a pure heart. What about the reward that the Lord Jesus speaks of - "they shall see God"? What does it mean to see God? We can try to answer that question by going forward in time, when we will be with the Lord Jesus in heaven, and then working back to where we are now. If we look at 1 John 3:2-3, we read the following: "Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him [that is, the Lord Jesus] purifies himself, just as He is pure."

John is telling us that we don't yet know what we will be like when we are in heaven with the Lord Jesus, but we do know that we will be like Him, and we will see Him. He then follows on with a very interesting application for us right now: "everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself." When we are with the Lord Jesus, and finally free from all sin, we will be pure, just as He is pure. The thought of being with Him, of seeing Him, and being like Him, should make us want to be pure now, just as He is pure. So 1 John 3:3 fits in very well with the Lord Jesus' words that the pure in heart will see God.

We can't see God now in a physical sense, of course. But when the Bible speaks of seeing something, it is occasionally possible to understand it in the sense of experiencing something. For example in John 3:36: "he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him." In this case, the person who refuses to believe in the Lord Jesus will not see life - that is, they will not experience eternal life, but will rather experience God's wrath. Another example is in 1 Peter 3:10: "For he who would love life and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips from speaking guile." Here we read about how we can experience good days, by taking care about our speech.

It is probably not unreasonable then, to understand the Lord's words "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God", as meaning that those of a pure heart are the ones who can be in His presence, and enjoy His company both now and hereafter.

We have some other verses in the Bible that back this up. For example, in Hebrews 12:14: "Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord". It is not possible to see the Lord, that is to be in His presence, without holiness. Or if we look in the Old Testament, in Psalm 24:3-5: "Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? Or who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not lifted up his soul to an idol, nor sworn deceitfully. He shall receive blessing from the Lord, and righteousness from the God of his salvation." This is a fascinating set of verses, because it fits in exactly with the Lord's words in the Beatitudes. It is the person with clean hands and a pure heart who can stand before God, and enjoy His presence.

To be comfortable in someone's presence means that there must not be anything between you and that person. If there are unresolved conflicts, or guilty secrets, there will be distance, or reserve. I'm sure that many of us have experienced this kind of thing at some time or other. I remember when there was something I needed to own up to, to a friend of mine. I felt uncomfortable in his presence until I had done that.

Our day-to-day relationship with our Heavenly Father, and with our Lord Jesus Christ, will also be affected if there is something that has come in, that is not consistent with what God desires. If we have believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, and accepted His forgiveness for our sins, then we can never lose our salvation. If we are born again, we can never cease to be a child of God.

The Bible is very clear on this - the Lord Jesus says in John 10:27-28: "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand." That does not mean, however, that it does not matter if we sin. If we sin, we need to confess it to God, so that it does not interrupt our day-to-day fellowship with Him.

To be sure, it does not alter our salvation and our eternal security, but it does affect our enjoyment of fellowship with God. It is rather like the case when a child misbehaves. The misbehaviour has no bearing on the relationship of the child to his or her parents - the child is always a son or daughter, and the parents still love their child in spite of the misbehaviour. But, there will not necessarily be a happy atmosphere until things are cleared up! In the same way, the Holy Spirit, who lives in all true believers, will not be able to encourage us by revealing the glories of Christ to us, but rather He will have to convict us of our sin and lead us to repentance (John 16:8).

If we are pure in heart, then there will not be these hindrances to our day-to-day fellowship with God. We will therefore be able to "see" God, in the sense of enjoying His presence. There is a similar verse in John's Gospel that backs up this interpretation. In John 14:21, the Lord Jesus says, "He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him." Here, the Lord Jesus is promising a special manifestation of Himself - a similar idea to that of "seeing God" - to the one who keeps His commandments. Therefore there is indeed a present reward for having a pure heart, and keeping in harmony with the Lord.

This is a real encouragement to us, because many of us, myself certainly, know how difficult it is to maintain a pure heart. Every day, there is so much that is within easy reach to defile us, and to lead us in ways that don't promote a pure heart. Our old nature, which the Bible calls the flesh, desires these impure things and does not aspire to a pure heart, so that we have a battle within ourselves. But our Lord Jesus encourages us with the verse we have been studying: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8). He knows the difficulties that we face, so He sets a present and a future reward before us to strengthen us.

As we close today's subject, let's remind ourselves of the key verses of the Bible that I mentioned, to help us remember the main points.

Firstly, the Beatitudes themselves: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matthew 5:3-12).

We then spoke about the need to keep our thoughts and imagination pure as one of the most important ways of having a pure heart. Proverbs 23:7 tells us that: "For as he thinks in his heart, so is he." We considered 1 Peter 1:13, "gird up the loins of your mind" and we thought about good discipline to not let our thoughts flow off in unhelpful directions.

Finally, we thought about what it means to “see God”, and we considered the 1 John 3:2-3, where we read the following: “Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.”

As we wait for the day when we are with the Lord, may God help us all to have a pure heart, so that we can enjoy His presence now!

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