

Learning to See as God Sees: Blessed Are the Pure in Heart
Proverbs 4:20-27 John 15:1-5

We're looking at the 6th beatitude this morning. This beatitude, like the reading from Proverbs 4, speaks about the 'heart.' Note: whenever you see the word "heart" in the Bible, it is speaking about the human center; the place of emotions and desires, of willing, even decision-making—the place that represents who each person is, in essence. What has been referred to as our true self. These are all covered in the Biblical concept of "heart." That's why Proverbs says, "Guard your heart." It's your life! Jesus will tell us to be vigilant about it, protect it, take inventory of it from time to time, and so forth.

John 15:1-5

15"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. ²He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. ³You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. ⁵I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.

6th beatitude: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

This is the word of the Lord!

As with some of the other beatitudes, I wonder what you think or how you react when you hear the phrase “pure in heart.” My guess is that many, if not most of us hear that and say, “That is not me! I think bad (‘impure’) thoughts, I say less than edifying things, I don’t consider myself very holy or religious.”

If that’s how you reacted, then I’m with you on all of those things. If that’s what is meant by pure in heart then your pastor fails, pretty regularly. But as with some of the other beatitudes, this word/phrase doesn’t mean what we might assume it means, on the surface.

Because we tend to think of purity—from a spiritual/religious perspective at least—as being equivalent to never having sinned or done something bad. Of being morally pure. Pure motives, always thinking holy thoughts and all that. But that isn’t what it really means.

The word “pure” here isn’t a great translation—it’s an *appropriate* translation, but it doesn’t capture the full meaning and intent.

The primary meaning and use of the word “pure” meant something like “clean.” It’s a word that was used to describe doing laundry; or washing dishes. Straightening up the house. It’s was a gardening word, too, which I’ll explain in a moment. It’s an everyday, ordinary word (which, again, is why I love Jesus’ teaching; he uses everyday language, not lofty and obscure theological language).

So you can see why “pure” is an okay translation, but “clean” captures the meaning better. And is used in a couple translations.

“Pure” is okay, but it sounds a little too religious and sanitized. My laundry isn’t pure when I wash it. Nor is the house pure when it’s straightened up. The word “clean” is a bit better because when we clean something we’re simply putting things where they belong. Like, dirt. Dirt isn’t bad, or wrong; it just doesn’t belong on clothes, or on the carpet. Someone has said that “Dirt is just matter that’s in the wrong place.” Dirt in the garden is good and right. It belongs there; we *need* it there. But we don’t need it in on the carpet or on our clothes. Shoes typically don’t belong spread out over the floor; they belong in the closet, on a shoe rack, or on our feet. When we clean house, that’s where they usually go.

If I say that our garage needs cleaning, that doesn’t mean it needs to be made spotless and without blemish; it usually means that it has things in it that we don’t need any more that need to be given away or thrown away, or that need to be stored properly and put on the shelves. We can’t make it “pure” in the way we typically think of purity, but we can make it clean.

So, with that in mind, another appropriate rendering of this word “pure” might be “uncluttered.” Blessed are those who have *uncluttered their heart*.

Who have gotten rid of the things they don't need in there, and other things that 'hinder and entangle' as Heb.12:1 puts it. Heb.12:1 paints a wonderful picture of the Christian life as being like a runner who casts aside the things that entangle and trip up, and *single-mindedly* and *simply* runs a race, pursuing a goal.

Prov.4 says the same thing... Keep your eyes ahead, give careful thought to your journey, guarding your heart—to keep it simple and focused and forward looking, (without getting derailed or distracted). And you'll be blessed.

Danish philosopher and Christian Soren Kierkegaard once said: "Purity of heart is to will one thing." And by "will one thing" he meant that the aim is to try to unclutter the heart and pursue the good. To be willing to will God's will.

So, this beatitude is about simplicity of intent and desire. No one wills God's will perfectly, all the time, nor do we completely understand it all the time. But if our goal and desire is to head that direction, and we are *willing* to fulfill the prayer "thy will be done," we're on the right track.

So, along these lines of learning to have a simple and uncluttered heart, one of the lessons we may need to learn is: learning to say no. Not just to bad things, obviously, but sometimes to good things too. Our lives can be cluttered and complexified by too many good things, sometimes. We know we need to say no to too much news or social media or television or harmful influences. But we

can also be bombarded with recommendations of books, seminars, articles, podcasts, new ideas, better habits, and even sermons about uncluttering your heart! So, it can be good to learn to say no. As long as there is a bigger Yes that we are committed to.

Steve Jobs: “True innovation begins with a thousand no’s.” That isn’t very spiritual, but practical. You get the idea.

“No” *can* be a good spiritual word, though! I understand, we’re really into “yes” these days—and “yes” is a wonderful, powerful word. But I don’t want us to forget that “no” helps us to will God’s will too! If we don’t learn to say no our hearts can become cluttered. Just like our garages can become cluttered if we say yes to everything that is asking for space in it. “No” helps us listen; it silences noise, it prevents distraction, and keeps us from being overly busy.

If we’re too busy it’s easy to become cluttered in heart and mind and we can gradually lose the ability to listen to God. Or, to see and experience God. That’s why the promised blessing for the pure in heart is: they shall see God. Which is a way of saying, “they shall know God” or “they shall experience God.” Because they have simplified and uncluttered their hearts. There is a ‘no’ that leads to a bigger ‘yes.’

Or, an uncluttering & simplifying that leads to a renewed focus, faith and fruitfulness.

A good example of this is in John's gospel, from our reading this morning, where Jesus says "I am the vine, you are the branches" and he talks about us abiding in him so we can bear fruit. Again, this is wonderful, everyday, non-religious language. In that teaching (verse 3) he says, "*Every branch that bears fruit [God] prunes to make it bear more fruit. You are already cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you.*" Those two sentences sound odd together until we realize that the word 'cleansed' here is the same word for 'prune' from the previous sentence, which is also the same word for 'pure' in the beatitude. So, this teaching from Jesus could be playfully translated, "Every branch that bears fruit God *purifies* to make it bear more fruit. You are already *purified* by the word I have spoken to you." Likewise, we could translate the beatitude, "Blessed are the *pruned* in heart, for they shall see God." Or, use the word clean or simplified.

Obviously, the word is translated into English in a variety of ways, depending on the context and connotations. But this gives us an idea of what Jesus is saying. Fun with words!

That's the primary meaning of this word pure—uncluttered, pruned, clean.

There is a secondary meaning and use of it which I'll touch on briefly:
sincere, consistent, congruent. Blessed are those who are sincere and consistent.
What you see is what you get. No false pretenses, no hidden agendas, no games.
Behavior that is congruent with one's true self.

'Simple, uncluttered sincerity' might be a good phrase that captures both meanings of this word "pure."

So, again, purity of heart does not mean perfection. It doesn't mean no mistakes, no bad thoughts, etc. This is not a call to moral perfection. This beatitude is a blessing pronounced on those whose inner and outer lives are consistent and congruent, or we might say who are on a *trajectory* of becoming truer and more consistent. Because it often takes people time (maybe a lifetime!) to figure out who they truly are, and how to live in the world that is therefore consistent and congruent with who they are. It's a matter of honesty about the journey, and the process.

Again, what you see is what you get. No false pretenses. Only the true self.

I am convinced that this is why Jesus said, "Unless you change and become like little children, you won't see the Kingdom of heaven." Because little children are pure in heart. It's interesting, these two sentences almost mirror each other:

“Change and become like a child, and *you will see God*,” and, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for *they shall see God*.”

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” applies pretty much to all small children (temper tantrums and all! Really). Because they are utterly sincere. With little children there are no hidden agendas. They are so wonderfully transparent, and honest with who they are and what’s on their heart and mind. Even when they are being a dickens!

And, they are sincere because they haven’t had clutter added to their lives, or layers of attempts at false identities that hide their true selves from others, or from themselves, out of fear or ego or trying to win approval from others. *Adults* get good at that—adding protective layers, or layers of identities or other things that complexify our lives. And much of that is necessary and part of growing up, of experimenting and of gaining knowledge, and of learning how to be in the world. But then, somewhere along the way, it stops working for us, and we feel the need to return to what Father Richard Rohr calls “A second simplicity,” particularly as we navigate midlife. Where we listen to our heart’s yearning for that childlike simplicity and trust and vulnerability. And we don’t return as much to innocence as to a new simplicity, a child-like trust and transparency.

Little children are just very real, and transparent. Which is why Jesus says they are our teachers also. Yes, we need to teach them. *And, we* need to learn from their simplicity and sincerity. Because they see God. And they see God everywhere. In the big things... and in the little things... And, they are open to movements of the Holy Spirit.

Video: little girl at communion hugging everyone who came forward.

We don't come forward these days, but try to imagine receiving a divine embrace as you prepare to take communion this morning.

Hymn of preparation: Breathe on Me, Breath of God