

The Upside-Down Kingdom: Blessed Are the Pure in Heart

Proverbs 4:20-27 John 15:1-5

We're looking at the 6th beatitude this morning: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." This beatitude, like the reading from Proverbs 4, speaks about the heart. And so, a brief note is in order: whenever you see the word "heart" in the Bible, it is speaking about the human center; the seat of our will, of desires and, even thinking and decision-making, when we can unify heart and mind, so they work in concert—the heart is the place that represents who each person is, in essence. What has been referred to in modern times as our *true self*.

And... importantly, the heart is considered *the place where God dwells*. It's our spiritual center. The place we go to where we meet God.

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 in various places 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.

This is the word of the Lord!

As with some of the other beatitudes, I wonder what your initial reaction is 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 do and 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. We all struggle with those things, pretty regularly. But as with some of the other beatitudes, this word “pure” and the phrase “pure in heart” 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 spotless. 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 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 religious/theological language. So you can see why “pure” is an okay translation, but “clean” captures the meaning better. And that word (clean) is used in a couple modern translations of the Bible.

“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 or in a forest is good and right. It belongs there; we *need* it there. But we don’t need it in the house on the carpet or on our clothes. Shoes typically don’t belong spread out over the kitchen floor or on the staircase. They belong in the closet, on a shoe rack, or on our feet. When we clean house, that’s where they usually go.

If we 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 gotten rid of, 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. Make sense?

So, with that in mind, another appropriate rendering of this word "pure" might be "uncluttered." Blessed are those who are *uncluttered in heart*, for they shall see God. In other words, blessed are those 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, for they shall see Jesus clearly, to follow him. 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 *simply* and *single-mindedly* 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, (trying not to get derailed or distracted). And you'll be able to see clearly.

Danish Christian philosopher 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. The “one thing” that God calls each of us to, whatever that is, within the spaciousness of his Kingdom.

Similarly, Thomas Merton has said that God only expects us to do one or two things, and do them well. If we try to do too much, or respond to every need, we become anxious and distracted.

So, along these lines of learning to have an 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 hearts and minds 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 become overwhelmed by recommendations of books, seminars, articles, podcasts, new ideas, better habits, and even sermons about uncluttering your heart! So, it can be good habit to learn to say no. As long as there is a bigger Yes that we are committed to.

Apple founder and CEO Steve Jobs: “True innovation begins with a thousand no’s.” That isn’t very spiritual, but it is practical.

“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 “no” can help us to will God’s will too, and discover our “one thing”—if we use it gently, and

wisely. If we don't learn to say no our hearts and minds 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. Spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle describes the human mind as "an incessant noise-making machine" that wants to create more busyness and worries and reactions to everything. And that can seem involuntary, the noise.

And therefore, as Eckhart Tolle and Thomas Merton and others tell us, if we can gently and wisely unclutter heart and mind, we increase our 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.

One of the favorite sign sayings we've put on our readerboard in recent weeks was: "My brain has too many tabs open." Like our computers and other digital devices can get bogged down if too many tabs are open, so it is with our minds and hearts.

Closing the tabs, spiritually speaking, creates a clarity that leads to a renewed focus, a simplicity of 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 invites us to abide

in him so we can bear fruit. Again, this is wonderful, everyday, non-religious language. In that invitation (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 in the New Testament Greek 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 this way: “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, congruent. Blessed are those who are sincere and congruent. What you see is what you get. No false pretenses, no hidden agendas. Behavior that is congruent with one’s true self in their heart.

“Simple 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 to figure out how to live in the world in a manner that is then 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.

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* (Kingdom)” 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 some of that is necessary and part of growing up, in adolescence and young adulthood, 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 my favorite Franciscan, Father Richard Rohr calls “A second simplicity,” particularly as we navigate midlife and beyond. Where we listen to our heart's yearning for that childlike simplicity and trust. 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. Yes, children need to be taught. *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, even with moments of immaturity they can be the most open and loving of human beings.

As a good example of this, I'd like us to watch a one-minute video, which I'm going to let speak for itself. It's a short video of what happened on a communion Sunday at one particular church.

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

This was a beautiful thing for a small child to do, in simplicity and sincerity giving a divine embrace to worshipers in a service. I'm not advocating that we adults do this, specifically. But there is a simple faith, simple hope, simple love that we can have and express when we let God prune, cleanse, unclutter our hearts and minds, so we may see, and enjoy God.

Breathe on Me, Breath of God