

March 16, 2008

“The Miracle of Purity”

Sermon on the Mount Series
Houghton Lake UMC

Matthew 5:1-8

The strong words of the beatitudes were the fanfare of the coming of the Kingdom of God. They were spoken by Jesus with great power and great force, and their echo continues to reverberate today in every Christian heart. They describe not only the path of discipleship, the path to becoming a disciple of Christ, but they also describe the constant spiritual condition of the Christian's life and attitude. The curriculum of a Christian lifestyle is here in outline form, and it is the curriculum of one who follows Jesus with all of their heart, mind, soul, and strength, and who loves their neighbor in the same way they love themselves.

Let's hear again the steps of discipleship, the foundation steps to our spiritual temple, the way that leads to eternal life. Let's hear them in their power:

1. Privileged recipients of divine favor are those who are poor in spirit, humble, and realize their need for God, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven, the heirs of the promise.
2. Privileged recipients of divine favor are those who mourn for their own sins, and who mourn for the sins of their neighbors, for they shall have God called alongside of them and will be fortified by his presence.
3. Privileged recipient of divine favor are the meek, those submissive to the will of God, for they will inherit the earth.
4. Privileged recipient of divine favor are those who hunger and hunger, thirst and thirst to become right with God—to be in a right relationship with God—doing what pleases Him. For these persons will be filled with all spiritual blessing.
5. Privileged recipients of divine favor are those who are merciful, who have the disposition and eagerness to forgive beyond fairness. For those who do such things will receive forgiveness beyond fairness in return.

And our text this morning: **“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”**

Purity...what a word. What a concept and what a fact. To be “pure in heart” is often beyond our wildest dreams, and yet here it is...”Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”

Can we be pure in heart? Is it possible, or do we have to sin in thought, word or deed everyday? Is it possible to be pure in such a world as ours? If it isn't possible, then why would this beatitude be a part of God's Kingdom? Why would Jesus place it in the lifestyle of discipleship? Why is it a foundation stone of Christian living? Why would we find it everywhere in the Bible and read it with such clarity as we find it here?

We not only find it in Jesus' words but also in exhortations throughout the New Testament. Listen to I Peter 1:13-16 (RSV): “Therefore, gird up your minds, be sober, set your hope fully upon the grace that is coming to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am Holy.’” Here Peter is quoting Leviticus 11:44-45.

Purity, holiness and sanctification are the same thing. The preeminent attribute of God's character is his holiness—his purity. This is a fact. He is not only a God of justice. His justice is holy justice. He is a God of love. But his love is holy love. He is a God of mercy, yes. But his mercy is a holy mercy. This is fact. This is revealed about God in the Bible from cover to cover, and I could spend all day listing the evidence. When Adam and Eve received the breath of life from the Holy Spirit, humankind was created in God's image—holy, pure, and without sin.

But when sin came into the world through the deception of the serpent and human kind attempted to be like God through disobedience, the very nature of humankind became evil and wicked.

Can we be holy again? Can we be restored to such a state of purity that God would deem us holy again? God says so! Peter says so! And Jesus, here in the beatitudes, says so! It is the work of God in us. It is the work of the Holy Spirit's gleaning and purifying fire. In Ephesians Paul

shares God's miracle of purity. In the exhortation section of chapter four we find a description of God's work and a direct exhortation to us. He says in 4:22-24, "Put off your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness."

The New Testament writers were convinced by their own experience that holiness was not only possible, but it was necessary in Christian living and victory. But I want to tell you something --- this state of purity cannot be earned. It cannot be gained by any human effort. Purity of heart is a gift bestowed on us as a result of our relationship with God, and as with all relationships, our relationship with God is two-way. God bestows on us his own character and likeness as we draw near to him. When we become his child under the covenant we begin a process of becoming like Him. Purity does not come by our own strength, nor does it come through magic or a process of osmosis. Purity is bestowed on us as a result of our commitment and journey with God.

God bestows forgiveness and mercy upon a person who is poor in spirit and mourns his or her sin and becomes submissive to God's will in their life. The work of grace we call salvation is poured upon the repentant heart, and a succession of things happen at this point. When we accept Jesus Christ into our lives as Savior and Lord we are reborn, regenerated, and quickened into spiritual life. We are grafted into the promise of God to Israel and become heirs of eternal life. We are adopted into his family, justified by Jesus Christ, and acquitted of the guilt of our sin. Also at this time there is a cleansing work done in our lives that we call initial sanctification, a work of holiness that gives us intimate access to God through prayer. This cleansing work makes us a new creature in Christ Jesus. We put off the "old man" -- our "old nature" -- as we are clothed in righteousness for the first time. It is then that the Holy Spirit indwells us and gives us spiritual life. The fruit and gifts of the Spirit begin to be manifest and we hunger and hunger,

thirst and thirst for more and more righteousness. All of this takes place in an instant, a spiritual work of God within us.

But as with physical life, so goes spiritual life. Physical birth is but the beginning of life. We are born with all sorts of potential. A small child has all of the seed buds for life, but if not nourished and loved, the potential is threatened and can be destroyed. If a child dies, we mourn the loss of potential as much as we mourn the loss of life itself. So, too, it is with the Spirit. Initial sanctification is the seed bud for purity, the potential for holiness. The growth of purity is the result of our continual desire to walk with God and to be conformed to his will. This takes more than our heart or a temporal short-lived feeling. It takes our will and our mind—our core of commitment. Purity is the by-product of our continual and consistent walk with our holy, pure and perfect God.

This is why Paul, in our Ephesians 4 passage admonishes us to “Put off our old nature”. This is an act of our will “which belongs to our former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts”, and be renewed in the what?—“in the spirit of our minds.” The purity of our heart happens when we commit our heart, soul, mind and strength to God. And this is not an isolated case. In Romans Paul emphasizes this commitment again when he wrote in Chapter 12:1-2, “I beseech you, I appeal to you, I beg of you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed,” How? “by the renewal of your mind, so that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

So then, even though purity of heart cannot be earned or obtained by human effort, it remains a gift of God bestowed upon us after our salvation and grows in strength and clarity while we pursue Him daily in our lives.

The persons who are pure in heart are “privileged recipients of divine favor and will see God.” These persons who have been sanctified, set aside for divine use, cleansed and washed in the blood of the lamb, shall see God with their very own eyes.

What power! What promise! And what a natural result for those who pursue God today as a hidden treasure, who love the Lord their God with all of their heart, mind, soul, and strength, and who love their neighbor in the same way they love themselves.

My friend, are you “pure in heart”? Are you being renewed daily, cleansed and healed and put at peace? Is God purifying you with his presence? I am sure that true purity for us will not be completely fulfilled until we enter Heaven. But, holiness is a part of our Christian walk. Purity is a part of our heart and of our mind as we draw closer to Jesus Christ spiritually.

How close are you to your Savior?

Have you had a work of salvation wrought in your life?

Are you being renewed daily?

By your will do you cast off your old nature and put on righteousness?

You can do that today, my friends, if God is not in your life. Hear again the power of this beatitude...

Privileged recipient of divine favor are those who have been made pure in heart by their continuous walk with God, for they shall see God with their own eyes.

“Breathe on us, breath of God, fill us with life anew, that we may love what you love Lord, and do what you would do.”

“Breathe on us, breath of God until our hearts are pure, until with you we will one will, to do and to endure.”

If you have surrendered to the Lord already, then the words of this hymn is in your heart. You want the Lord present with you. You desire his will above your own. You seek first the kingdom of God so that God can bless you through your obedience. Praise the Lord today that God has made you pure!