

Blessed are the Pure in Heart

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Preacher: David Parker

[0 : 00] There's three things that I'm going to explore from this beatitude. And the first thing is piety begins in the heart.

And the second thing is pathway to purity of heart. And the third thing is that piety of heart matters. But before I explore those three areas of this beatitude, as I normally do, I do wish to make some introductory comments.

The first comment is that I want you to bear in mind that all of the beatitudes that Jesus shares with us and that he declared are found in the Old Testament.

Jesus is well aware of those beatitudes and the ideas contained in those beatitudes from the Old Testament.

[1 : 05] For instance, we read in the Old Testament, as a man, as a person thinks, so is he. My son, give me your heart.

Rend your heart, not your garments. And in one sense, therefore, in the beatitudes, the genius of Jesus is bringing all those strands from the Old Testament in such a concise way and delivering them in the form of those snappy beatitudes.

Jesus is echoing Old Testament.

Remember how Jesus said that you should worry about cleaning the inside of the cup and not the outside of the cup. You remember how Jesus said that the religionists of his day were like sepulchers.

They were absolutely beautiful in the outside and full of deadness in the inside. You know, actors and actresses play a character that is often not like them in any way, and yet they can portray the character, can't they, in a persuasive way.

[2 : 48] In Greek tragedy, all the actors wore masks. And these masks represented the characters they were playing.

And if you'll allow me, I also want to read at this point something from Shakespeare's play, Hamlet. And let me just give you the setting of what I'm about to read. This is the beginning of Shakespeare's play, Hamlet.

Hamlet, as you know, or some of you may know, his father, the king, has been killed. He doesn't know at this stage how he's been killed.

And he's in a big room in the castle of the new king, who's married to his mother. And the new king is also his uncle.

[3 : 48] And there are people in this great hall asking requests of the king. But Hamlet is standing there and he's very noticeable because of his clothes, because all his clothes are black.

And I pick up the reading here. Here is the queen. Good Hamlet, cast thy knighted colour off, and let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark.

Do not forever with thy veiled lids seek for thy noble father in the dust. Thou knowest, tis common, all that lives must die, passing through nature to eternity.

Hamlet, aye, madam, it is common. The queen, if it be, why seems it so particular with thee?

Hamlet, seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not seems. Tis not alone, my inky cloak, good mother, nor customary suits of solemn black, nor windy suspiration of forced breath.

[5 : 06] No, nor the fruitful river in the eye, nor the rejected, the detected behaviour of the visage. Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief that can denote me truly.

These indeed seem, for they are actions that a man might play. But I have that within which passes show these, but the trappings and suits of woe.

Yes, Jesus was well aware of the masks of the scribes and Pharisees. Outwardly, they seemed so pious.

Sabbath observance, ritual cleansing, rules regarding their law, 613. The problem was the person behind the mask.

In this beatitude, Jesus is unmasking their sham spirituality. But Jesus is also saying, in this beatitude, that authentic religion begins from the inside, from the heart.

[6 : 23] With the heart, says Paul, we believe. Now, I preach this sermon firstly to myself, and I mean that.

But I also ask, what of you and me? Is our faith a mass, a role, or a character we play?

Or is our faith from the heart? My last point of introduction is this. I want you to note the connection between seeing God and spiritual purity or sincerity of heart.

If I could sum these introductory comments up, it's in this way, that in this beatitude, Jesus is capturing, in this single beatitude, his own theology of genuine religion, or may I say, genuine Christianity.

Firstly then, let me look at this. Piety begins in the heart. You see, Jesus knows the human heart. In issuing this beatitude, Jesus shows and knows that humanity's problem is not out there somewhere, but inside our own heart.

[7 : 52] Now, it doesn't follow, of course, that human beings, even in their fallen state, are incapable either of love or morality. Jesus gives the lie to that when he tells us that even sinners love one another.

Nevertheless, Jesus knows that it is we ourselves that are the problem. The heart of the problem, declares Jesus, is people's heart.

Listen, for example, to what Jesus says in Matthew 7, verses 14 and 15. Jesus called the crowds and said, listen to me, everyone.

Nothing outside you can defile you by going into you. And then down at verse 19, or rather down at verse 20.

What comes out of you is what defiles you. For from within, out of your hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, and so on and so on.

[9 : 06] All those evils come from the inside and defile you. You know, in making that statement, Jesus is casting judgment over the entire edifice of the ritualism and rules of the religionists of his day.

It's no different today. Our racism, our desire to have power over other people and nations, our greed, our pride, our addiction to idolatry ourselves, is the root of our predicament.

If I can quote the words of a Nick Cave song, people ain't no good. And furthermore, Jesus also knows that following religious rules and rituals are not the answer.

I once heard the late Martin Lloyd-Jones thunder out in his sermon, It isn't this formula or that formula or this rule or that rule or more education that we need but power.

Power that will emancipate and liberate us. Power that, as we sung in that psalm, that would create in us a clean heart. Power that, as we sung in that psalm, that's a clean heart. Power that, as we sung in that psalm, that's a clean heart.

[10 : 23] So Jesus knows what's in the heart of human beings, and he knows that it's precisely there that our problem lies. Power that, as we sung in that psalm, that's a clean heart.

But Jesus also knows where the place of true religion or discipleship must begin. It is not located in any of the external rules or rituals of religion, but within the heart.

This is the point of this beatitude. Oh, the blessedness of the pure in heart, for they shall see God. In identifying the heart as the locus and source of authentic spirituality, Jesus is calling people to himself. And he's calling them not to a rule-based Christianity, but to a relational and personal Christianity.

He is calling people to look to him for that purity of heart. Jesus knows his Bible, and he knows that that Bible tells us that we need a new heart, a new inner center to our being, since our own inner self is incurably self-centered rather than God-centered.

[11 : 48] But if our hearts are incurably self-centered, how do they become pure? And what does pure mean here? And this brings me to my second point, pathway to purity.

Now, of course, it doesn't mean perfection, because we read in an important verse in the Proverbs, in chapter 20, in verse 9 of the Proverbs, we read this.

The heart is seen in the Bible as the seat, the nucleus, the center of the person, the inner self, the inner self, the real you, the I, the me.

You must have had this experience that I've had. You can actually observe your own thoughts. You can catch yourself thinking and be even thinking about your own thoughts and observing your own thoughts.

In other words, that's something that is observing those thoughts is something other than the thoughts. And this is what the Bible says is the real us.

[13:27] As Pamela says, it's much more than this inky cloak that consists of me. Now, so the heart is seen in the Old Testament as the center of the self, the I, the me, the real person, the domain where the real you lives, without your masks, and me, without my masks.

And what about the word pure? Here is a word many of us will know because the Greek word is the same as an English word that we know, and that word is catharsis.

Now, catharsis involves removal and purging. Let me give you a very ordinary example. The other day, I was doing a lot of work in the garden and uprooting lots of very big bushes and other things. And I was doing that for a while and getting them into the boot of my car and going to the dump a few times and coming back. And I felt quite unclean.

And I thought, I must go up and have a shower. And that shower was cathartic for me because it made me feel clean and it removed all the sort of feeling of little beasties and dirt that I might have picked up in this exercise.

[15:05] And if I could also say to you that Freud, in his psychoanalysis, he was trying to bring a catharsis to his patients.

And the reason he was doing that is he was trying to find what was in their unconscious that was disturbing their conscious and their present life. And remove that so that it would be cathartic for them and they would be healed.

But you see, the most important catharsis, and this is the word that is used in this beatitude, blessed of the poor in spirit, is spiritual catharsis.

This is the kind of catharsis that Jesus offers. This is a cleansing and a purging and a catharsis that only Jesus can affect. No one or nothing else can achieve it.

No wonder that psalm has said in that psalm we sang, I repeat it for the second time, Create in me, O God, a clean heart. No amount of ritual or religious adherence to the outward rules of Christianity or any other religion can affect it.

[16:22] Bonhoeffer reminds us by saying this, Who is pure in heart? Only those who have surrendered their hearts to Jesus. So the first step in the pathway to purity of heart is to surrender our whole being to Jesus Christ.

We might call this the primary matter in regard to being pure in heart. May I ask, have you undergone spiritual catharsis? Have you been cleansed by the blood of Christ's sacrifice? Has your guilt and shame been removed in the shower of Christ's blood? What about the secondary characteristics of pure in heart?

And I'm conveying to you the connotations and the nuances of this Greek word. And I give you three.

Sincerity. Somebody that's pure in heart, their heart is pure in the sense of there's an inner and outer consistency in one's motives and actions.

[17:27] Exactly what there wasn't with the scribes and the Pharisees. And secondly, a pure heart in the terms of the scripture there means not only a sincere heart, but a single-minded heart.

Kierkegaard put it this way. It's to have one will. It's to have this one will of a basic desire for God. And thirdly, a pure heart not only is a heart of sincerity and single-mindedness, but it's a heart of self-denial. It's a heart that keeps a watch on its door, denying entry to dodgy-looking persons or things.

Can I ask, how is your heart tonight as I ask, how is mine? Is it pure in those three senses? Is there a consistency between the motives and the motivation and the trajectory of your heart and your actions? Is your heart of a single mind?

[18:41] You cannot serve God and mammon or any other idol. Are you keeping a watch in the door of your heart? And that brings me to my third and final point.

Piety matters. Piety matters. Because of the blessing promised in this beatitude, that's why it matters.

And what is it that Jesus declares that will be found by those who are pure in spirit. It's astounding what he says.

He says, they shall see God. Notice, please, that statement.

They shall see God. Did God not say that no one shall see me and live? Did God not say to Moses, you will see my back, but you cannot see my face?

[19 : 53] And you know that this phrase that Jesus uses and the language of that phrase conveys the idea of being admitted into the more immediate presence of God.

It conveys the idea of a greater experience of God.

Now, we might think it's an honor to be admitted into the more immediate presence of the Queen.

But if you're a believer tonight, you will one day be admitted into the nearer presence of God.

And you shall see him and experience his more immediate presence than you do right now. Is that not astounding?

The high priest in Old Testament times was only allowed to go into the Holy of Holies once a year.

But we disciples of Jesus, whose hearts have been purified by his grace and his sacrifice, will enter into the more immediate presence of God forever and ever.

[21 : 26] Surely, that's a promise worth keeping before our minds. What is all our struggle and striving about?

What is the goal of our pilgrimage? What is the arrival point for those of us who are Christians? It is, as Jesus tells us here, to see God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as we have never seen him before.

And to experience him as we have never experienced him before. But can I also say, it's not only the future.

And although the language is the future, but we must bear this in mind. Because God's future is already present in Jesus, we can experience his presence right now.

Now you may ask, but okay, how will I be ready for such an experience of God when that day comes, when I am admitted into his nearer presence?

[22 : 52] How will I be ready for such an experience? Will I be ready? You will. Why? Why? Because God's grace promises to conform every true believer to the image of Christ.

But further, Peter tells us that we will be partakers of the divine glory. Can I say that again?

That Peter tells us in his second letter, chapter 1, verse 4, that we believers will be, this is our destiny, to be partakers of the divine glory.

What do texts like this mean? Well, the Eastern Orthodoxy calls them theosis and deification. Let's just stick with Peter's language, partakers of the divine nature.

We, of course, have a responsibility to aim for perfection. As I read from Proverbs earlier on, no Christian will ever attain perfection in this life.

[24 : 04] But that doesn't mean to say that that's not what we're to aim at. But God ultimately will transform us and we will be ready to see the King of Kings and Lord of Lords on that day.

One of the later church fathers, St. Simeon, once said, speaking of Jesus, he became what we are to make us what he is. He became what we are to make us what he is.

I began this final point by asking, why does all this business of being pure in spirit matter? I hope I've said enough to convince you that not only does it matter, but it is our gateway into being admitted into the nearer presence of God.

Blessed are the pure in spirit, they shall see God. Are you excited as a Christian, not only by what we have now, but what the future holds?

Have you gone through your own spiritual catharsis, can I ask, and been purged of your guilt and shame and sin by coming to Christ? Is your Christianity more than the religious actions that a person may play?

[25 : 20] Are you able to say, like, Hamlet in that play, I have that within that passage show? Do you look forward to being admitted into the more immediate presence of God?

I'm nearly finished. Sorry for going on a bit longer this evening. I'm sorry for going on a bit longer this evening. But we'll be like the astronomer who sees things in the night sky that those of us who are lay people are unable to see.

Or we'll be like the painter who sees things in a painting not seen by the untrained eye. Or we will be like people having cataracts removed from our eyes as we are ushered in forever and ever into the glorious and nearer presence of God.

And at that time, we will enjoy a greater appreciation of God. A greater experience of God.

A greater understanding of God. And greater communion with God. Can I ask, I hope you can see God in the face of Jesus Christ.

[26 : 47] And can I also ask as we finish, can you see God in your experience and circumstances, whatever they might be, right now?

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for they shall see God. Amen. May the Lord bless these words to each one of us.

Amen.