

"Blessed are the Pure in Heart"

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[0 : 00] Good morning. It's good to see you all. I'm glad you're here this morning. As we turn to the scriptures, if you are not a note-taker, you might want to be a note-taker this morning. We're going to be looking at a bunch of different scriptures. They will be up on the screens, but you may want to jot them down so you can refer to them again later as you're reflecting on God's Word this morning. So that's my public service announcement before we begin. The other thing I just want to say is it's not that warm in here this morning, but if you find yourself overwhelmed by the heat, we do have in the downstairs meeting room, the service is live-streamed and it is air conditioned. So if you need that, please, you can walk out these doors here and the ushers can direct you to where you would want to go if that would be true for you.

Jesus had a problem with religion in the first century. This may be a surprising statement to you, but I believe he did. He came proclaiming the kingdom of God, that the kingdom of God was at hand, and yet what he found in the religious leadership, particularly in Jerusalem and Israel where he came, the Jewish leaders, they had different ideas about what true religion really was. He ended up confronting false views about what God really wants from us. For it seems, from the witness of the Scriptures, that the Jewish leadership in the first century held a view where external observance and ritual obedience was the most important thing to God, that their religion was about doing the right thing and obeying the law in the obvious external means.

And Jesus is constantly dancing with this false view of religion, confronting, clarifying, and trying to help people see what the kingdom of God that he was bringing would really look like. Here, some of his words, Matthew 21, in the Sermon on the Mount, a few verses after our passage that we'll focus on this morning. He said, You have heard it said to those of old, you shall not murder, and whoever murders will be liable to judgment. But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment, and whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council, and whoever says, you fool will be liable to the hell of fire. A few verses later in Matthew 5, 27, he says, You have heard it said, you shall not commit adultery. But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away, for it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. That's at the beginning of his ministry. At the end of his ministry, Jesus confronts the Pharisees near the end of his life. In Matthew 23, verses 23 through 28, he says these things, Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you tithe mint and dill and cumin.

These are things that are part of the law, the law of Moses, but have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done without neglecting the others, you blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they're full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisees, first clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside may also be clean. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, for you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness.

So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. Now when you listen carefully, Jesus is not saying that their external righteousness was wrong in and of itself, but that it did not constitute what true religion was, but instead that there was an internal reality where the kingdom of God truly dwelt. And friends, I wonder if this is not just a first-century attitude that Jesus was confronting. I think it's an attitude that we find in our world today, too.

[5 : 10] If you walk out on the street and you ask people, what do you think God really wants? What's going to be their first answer? That you be a good person. That you be a good person. And by that, they probably mean that you're kind and gentle, that you don't do egregiously heinous things.

And of course, everyone's standard will be different about what that would look like, good person. But whatever it is, that's what the world would say. This is what God wants, isn't it? That you do good things. I wonder if even in the Christian church, we struggle with this view. I wonder if we think, if I'm good enough, then I'm okay with God. If I haven't blown it that badly. If I didn't look at pornography that many times. If I didn't lose my temper too much. If I got angry, but I didn't punch the wall, then I'm okay.

And then some of us may struggle with the opposite. I know I'm not good enough, and I try really hard to be good, but I'm not, and God will never accept me. How many Christians think like this in our everyday lives? How many of us think like this? The spirit of religious observance looking good enough on the inside, or it's core to our human heart, our human fallen heart.

And we so easily bring it to the Bible, and then it shapes how we view the Bible, so the Bible simply becomes a list of rules for us to follow. And we think that's what God really cares about.

And that brings us to our passage today. We're in a series in the Beatitudes. It's in the book of Matthew chapter 5 in our Pew Bible. It's page 759. And if you remember, the Beatitudes in the book of Matthew is the first of five teaching sections where Jesus is laying out visions of the kingdom of God, bringing in passages from the Old Testament, and helping people understand the fulfillment of them in what Jesus is bringing. And he's clarifying it's not a new set of laws, these Beatitudes, but instead it's a portrait of what life in God's kingdom looks like. It's when God is reigning in people's hearts, these are the people who are blessed. This is what it looks like when that is true in people's lives. So let's read the Beatitudes together, and we'll pray, and then we'll look at this for a few minutes together. Matthew 5, starting in verse 2.

[8 : 13] And he, that is Jesus, 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 satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive 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 others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Let's pray and ask God's help as we look at his word today. Lord Jesus, we ask for your help this morning. Lord, we know that on our own, we are so prone to bring this religious framework to your word.

Lord, I pray, Lord, this morning that you would help us see a different way. Lord, in the nature of what your kingdom is really like. Lord, I pray for our hearts that we would be soft before you, humble and willing to receive your word.

And Lord, I pray for your help that I might speak your words clearly. Lord, I pray for your help that I might speak your word.

Lord, I pray for your help. Lord, I pray for your help. These beatitudes aren't very complicated. So, the outlines are fairly similar. What does this really mean and how does this look like in our lives? So, those are our three things. So, the first question that we look at as we look at this, blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God, is what does it mean to be pure in heart? Well, clearly, Jesus is clarifying purity in the face of the first century Jewish religion where ritual purity, cleanliness, washing your hands.

[10 : 55] If you read through the Levitical law, you see there's all these laws about being pure, people who can go into the temple and when they have to stay out of the temple and touching dead bodies and bodily fluids and all sorts of interesting things that make you unclean or keep you clean and allow you to enter into the temple. And Jesus, in the light of this, Jesus is saying the purity of the kingdom of God is actually not those external things, but it's something greater than that.

It's internal. It is an inner reality that the heart is a place where our...not just where our feelings or our emotions reside in humanity, but in the Bible, the heart is a place, the nexus of our physical and spiritual and mental life. It's where our soul and our mind and our body and our will all work together.

So the heart is the center of our human being. And Jesus says, blessed are the pure in heart. Now, what kind of purity is he thinking about? What does pure even mean? Pure is without flaw or blemish. When you think about pure drinking water, right? Okay, so I know that there's a level at which this gets really complex with some of you chemists out there. Give me a little bit of leeway here.

Pure water is water that is only water without a lot of additives, without a lot of pollutants, without things that are going to do damage to you, right? That's what pure water is. And when water isn't pure, when it's impure, it's because it has things that are not water that do harm, that pollute or corrupt the water. So it's not able to do what it's supposed to do. So if you drink polluted water, it does damage for you instead of drinking pure water, which does good things to you. So this is a picture of what purity is in a physical world. What does purity look like in our hearts?

I want to argue that there are two aspects to it. One is probably the one that we often think of, and this is a purity of our moral thoughts and actions. You see Jesus talking about this, right?

[13 : 24] It's not just good enough to not commit adultery and do murder, but in your hearts, do you hate? Do you lust? This is a kind of purity of heart, and Jesus continues to do this without the Sermon on the Mount. We're going to expound the Sermon on the Mount this fall. We're going to keep going through Matthew this fall, and so you're going to see this over and over again how Jesus is going to say it's our heart attitudes that are at the core of what this looks like. And so we see that it's loving the right things, and it's loving rightly. It's pursuing the right heart posture of obedience, of humility. It means that we hate things that are evil, that are wrong, that are sin.

It means that our greatest desire is to know the character of God and then to imitate it as much as we can. It is being like Jesus.

This is purity of heart in our morality, in our kindness, in our relationships, in our inner thought life. But I think that's only one of the aspects of purity that we see here, because I think the other form of purity that we see is a purity of devotion. We read earlier from Psalm 24, and many people think that Psalm 24 was in Jesus' mind when he was preaching this sermon, because we see the elements of blessing and of purity of heart and of cleansing.

We see this, right? And so what we see here in Psalm 34 is Jesus saying, who can ascend to God's holy hill? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their soul to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully.

It's an interesting translation decision. In the NIV, it translates those last verse that I just said, in verse 4, translates, who do not trust in an idol or swear by a false God.

[15 : 45] So the purity of heart isn't just moral purity, but it's a single-minded devotion to God Himself. And friends, is this not what we hear throughout the Scriptures? In Deuteronomy chapter 6, when God wanted to summarize all the commandments, what did He say? It's to love the Lord your God with all of your heart and soul and mind and strength. Jesus will reiterate this idea later in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6.24. When He's talking about money, mammon, He says, no one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.

And so this purity of devotion is a purity of God is first in everything. God is my primary one. He is the one that I long to please. He is the one that I will lay down my life for. He is the one that I make my whole life open to His use. I will say this. We often think of an undivided heart in this sense as someone who has their priorities right. So our motives are pure. We give attention to the right things. And I think that's generally good. But I was thinking about what it looks like to have an undistracted heart. And I was thinking about having conversations with people. Have you ever had a conversation with someone who's distracted? You know, you're talking with them. Maybe you're pouring out your heart and sharing with them something. And they're listening, but then their eyes are wandering and they're watching other things. Or maybe they're in the stage. They're pulling out their phone. They're looking at their phone a little bit while you're at. Have you ever had a conversation with someone who's distracted like that? And you just want to sort of grab their face and say, I want you to look at me. I want you to listen to me. I want you to value me. I want you to pay attention to me. I want you to make me the point of this interaction. Friends, that's what God desires from us. That we would not live lives that are so distracted that we're not paying attention to God, that we're not listening to Him, that we're not seeking Him, that we're not conversing to Him, that we're not loving Him and making Him the focus of our lives.

So I think when Jesus says, blessed are the pure in heart, this is the picture. Moral purity, but also undivided devotion. A unified heart of love for God.

So this is those who are blessed, who live this kind of life. The beatitude goes on and it says, so with these people, they get to see God. We see this in Psalm 24, this image of ascending to His holy hill or standing in His presence is this idea that we could go to a place and God's presence would be there and we could actually see Him. But if you've read your Bible for a while, you know there's a problem with this idea. And we need to address the problem before we can talk about the solution. And the problem is this. From Exodus 33, verses 18 through 23, Moses, remember this, Moses, God delivered people from Egypt. He gave them the Ten Commandments. He gave them the law.

Moses came down from Mount Sinai. The people were worshiping other gods, the golden calf. God brought judgment. And then He said, okay, Moses, now move on. Lead these people out of Egypt and into the promised land that I have for you. And Moses says, whoa, whoa, whoa. I can't lead these people.

[20 : 07] How can I? I need to see your face to know that we can go ahead. And Moses says this, Please show me your glory. And God said, I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name, the Lord. And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But, He said, you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.

And then God goes on and says, but I'm going to hide you in a rock and I'm going to pass by and you can see like the after, the back end of my glory. And that'll be enough. You'll see just a taste of it.

And that'll be enough, but it won't destroy you. Right? This idea is repeated in other parts of the Bible as well. God is called invisible in Colossians 1.15 and in 1 Timothy 1.17.

In 1 Timothy 6, Paul has this benediction about God. And he says that God is the blessed and only sovereign, the King of kings and the Lord of lords who alone has immortality or immort... Golly, that was a myth. Let me restate that.

He is the King of kings and Lord of lords who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion forever.

[21 : 52] So how can Jesus say these can see God when the Bible tells us in other places we can't see God? What is the problem with seeing God as we've seen so far? Well, I think there are two theological reasons. One is that I think that this inability to see God is based in some verses, particularly in Colossians and 1 Timothy, in the idea that God is a spirit and that he is not a part of the physical world. And so we as a part of the physical world cannot see, literally see the physical world with our eyes. And so some of the distinction of we cannot see God has to do with our ontology, that we can't see a spiritual being unless he chooses to manifest himself in certain ways like he does with Moses or a few other places in the Scriptures. So I think that's one of the ways. And then the other way, we saw this in the 1 Timothy 6, and I think it also is...we're reminded about it from the Psalm 24, 4, where we're reminded that God is holy. That means he is perfect and glorious. The unapproachable light that he lives in is the blazing fire of his moral perfection. And like the sun, we cannot get close to it without the imperfection of our fallen nature being so burned up that we are like moths to a flame, and we just...we would be burned up if we get too close.

So this is why the Bible puts out this. No one can see God. No one can get that close. No one can bear the fullness of his glory without being completely destroyed by it.

Yet, there are ways in which the Bible says we can and will see God. What does that look like? Well, first of all, it's because we have Jesus.

John 1, 18 says this, No one has seen God, the only God who is at the Father's side. He has made him known.

This is at the end of the grand John prologue to his gospel when he says, God was...Jesus was with God in eternity. He was God, and he came and he took on human flesh, and he came so that we could see God in human form. This is the greatest manifestation, the singular incarnation of God in human flesh so that we can see what God looks like, not in the fullness of his glory in the sense of his being a burning sun, but the fullness of his glory in that here's all of his perfection portrayed in one who took on human flesh.

[24 : 57] So, Jesus, the glory of God dwells in human...in the human body, and so we can see God in Jesus in that way. The second way is that we can see God by faith. Hebrews 11 reminds us that faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it, the people of old receive their commendation. By faith we understand that the universe was created by the Word of God, so that what was seen was not made out of things that are visible. There's a lot in that verse I'm not going to pay attention to, but I just wanted to pull it in to say faith gives us eyes to see in a way that we don't see with our physical eyes. It's not about us being literally physically in the presence of God, but by faith we are able to understand and apprehend and know God.

And finally, the Bible tells us that one day when he renews all things, when we are finally in a new heavens and a new earth, and the fullness of his kingdom comes, that we will actually see God face to face.

So Revelation 22, 3 and 4 says, No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.

So there will be a day, because when our sin is removed, when our fallen nature is fully remade in the eternal heavens and the earth, we will not have those impurities to be burned up by God.

And I don't know the ontology of heaven to know how our spirits and our physical being somehow combine, but it sure seems like whatever that eternal being is, there's a unification of it in a glorious way where we will actually be able to see God in ways that we cannot.

[27 : 16] So these are some ways in which the Scripture talks about seeing God and why it's hard to see God and why the pure in heart can see God.

Now, by faith in Jesus and in the future in a new and glorious way that we may only be able to begin to describe.

And this is true religion for Jesus. Those who see God are those who have a pure heart. Now, you may be sitting here this morning, like I was as I was preparing for this and thinking, this beatitude does not seem like good news to me.

Because some of the beatitudes, I can think, oh, I can do that. I can mourn. Maybe I could be meek. Maybe. But to be pure in heart?

Are you kidding me? There's no way my heart is truly pure. My understanding of right and wrong is still flawed.

[28 : 27] And my doing of right and wrong is still flawed. My heart is divided. I love too many other things too much and love God far too little.

We cannot make our hearts pure even if we strive and grow in it. We cannot do this to the perfection that we would want that this calls us to.

But God knows this, friends. And this is the good news of the gospel. Because we can get a pure heart.

God. God. Not by our striving. Not by our external observance. But by turning to God and letting Him give us something that we can't have and can't get on our own.

This is the good news of the gospel. Alex has already referred to this a number of times. We're going to look at another passage. One of the great passages in the Old Testament.

[29 : 28] If you remember the story of the nation of Israel. God had delivered them from Egypt and brought them into a promised land and said, Just be faithful to me. Just follow me.

And love me with all of your heart and soul and mind. And I will give you a blessed promised land. But they couldn't do it. They couldn't maintain their purity of heart. And they failed and they failed and they failed.

And God finally sent them into exile. And there was despair that people could ever know God and be God's people. But in Ezekiel 36, the prophet Ezekiel speaks of a new covenant and of a new day when God will come.

He says this, And I will sprinkle clean water on you. And you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses. And from all your idols I will cleanse you.

And I will give you a new heart and a new spirit I will put within you. I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh. And give you a heart of flesh.

[30 : 31] And I will put my spirit within you. And cause you to walk in my statutes. And be careful to obey my rules. Friends, this is the good news of the gospel.

That Jesus came and lived the perfect heart, the perfect life of a pure in heart person. That we could never live. And then he gave himself up and died on the cross bearing the judgment and the punishment and the scorching, burning fire of God's righteousness against our sin.

He bore that in himself. So that all who place their faith in him will know that Jesus has borne that for us. And instead of receiving judgment before God, God's going to give us forgiveness of sin so that it no longer is accounted against us.

He's going to cleanse us so that we no longer have the stain of sin on our hearts. He's going to renew us, making us born again, giving us a new heart and a new spirit.

So that our old heart and our fallen self that loved sin and self always and unerringly no longer has the power.

[31 : 49] But we are made new and God gives us a new heart. And we finally have the power and the possibility of pursuing God and loving God in the way that he's called us to.

This is what Jesus has done for us. This is the good news of the gospel, that he has given us a new heart so that we could be. Pure because we are transformed more and more into the likeness of Jesus so that our character has the nature of Jesus with love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and goodness and gentleness and self-control.

Not anger and jealousy and rage and impurity and all the other things that so often control our hearts. This is what Jesus has done for us.

And he's also given us a heart that we can finally love God. Because when our hearts were dead in their sins and trespasses, we couldn't love God at all.

But when God, who is great in mercy, made us alive with him in Christ, we are able then to see and love God above all other things.

[33 : 13] And so James, in James chapter 4, verses 8 through 10, can say this as a command to the church.

Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to gloom.

Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you. James says you can pursue cleansing your heart.

But what does it look like? Trying harder to do better? No. It looks like humbly acknowledging and confessing your sin. Mourning that you are not pure as you would.

And pursuing God because he will draw near to you and be at work in your hearts. As we begin to pursue God's kingdom with this new heart that he's given us from the gospel, then finally we can pursue being pure in heart, not in a pharisaical way where all we care about is the external, we want to look good for others, or thinking that our actions achieve God's pleasure, or, I'm sorry, let me rephrase that, achieve God's acceptance.

[34 : 38] But we do it that flows from this heart that God has already given us, that we know we don't deserve, and that we need desperately to depend on him, to cultivate and to make more and more real in our lives.

And as we do this, we submit to his word and allow him to define what is right and wrong. And we seek to obey and ask for the Spirit's help daily to do it more and more.

And we ask God to continue to change our hearts so that we would love him and love the things that he loves and hate sin and the things that he hates.

Now, some of you really want me to be practical, so I'm going to try for a few minutes. How do we do this? First, be in God's word.

Let God grab your cheeks and make you look at him and say, pay attention to me. This is how we pay attention to God, by reading his word.

[35 : 42] We must be in his word to saturate our heart and our soul and to shape our mind and the way we think and to influence how we relate to one another.

Let God's word dwell richly in your heart. Secondly, rid yourself of filth. If you know that you're consciously embracing and taking in impurity and distraction, cut it off.

Remember what Jesus said. If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out so that you may pursue God. Be ruthless in eliminating the things that capture your heart and stain your soul.

Think about your media, your books, the company you keep. Guard your heart against the things, the places where you allow your heart to go in trials.

Know what leads your heart astray and rid yourself of these things. Third, recognize that coming to faith in Jesus is a once-for-all thing that Jesus does in our hearts, but it is then an ongoing affirmation of what we... So determine this day, I will have no other gods before the God of the Bible.

[37 : 18] I will worship no one but Jesus. Ask God to show you what are the rivals in your hearts. Is it your own personal pleasure, your success, a relationship, another person?

What is it that controls your day-to-day lives? Let God be that more and more. Fourth, do this in humility.

Nick's reading in church history this fall is going to show you that the path of the church has been littered with people who have gone astray seeking purity and righteousness in different ways.

And so do this in community. Don't try to do this alone. Ask other people to help you, to support you, to encourage you, to ask you the questions that you know you don't want anyone to ask about whether your heart is pure or not.

Invite others in and love one another well enough so that you might encourage one another to please the Lord. And finally, again remember what James said.

[38 : 29] We can only do this by God's power. One of the greatest curses of the world is the self-righteousness of the church where we say we have made ourselves clean.

We have made ourselves good and right. We have made ourselves acceptable to the world. And then as we look down on others who are not like that. This is not the gospel.

The gospel is I have an unclean heart but God in His mercy has given me a new heart. And I can't be good apart from God's Spirit working in me.

So daily ask God for help. Let God engage in the regular practice of confessing your sin and letting God cleanse you from your sin and purifying your hearts from all unrighteousness as it says in 1 John 1.

Let God do this based on what He has already done for you in Jesus. I want to close simply by reading from Hebrews chapter 9.

[39 : 44] This is a concluding exhortation in the argument in the book of Hebrews, or Hebrews chapter 10 verses 19 through 25. I'm going to read this and then we'll pray to close our service.

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that He opened for us through the curtain that is through His flesh, and since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water.

Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another all the more as you see the day drawing near.

Friends, this is true religion, not external conformity, but an internal transformation. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Let's pray. Oh, Lord, we come before You and we recognize, Lord, that You are a great and holy and perfect God.

[41 : 22] Lord, perfect in Your majesty, perfect in Your righteousness, perfect in Your love and grace. And, Lord, who can stand before You?

Who could be in Your holy temple or ascend to Your holy hill? Lord, in and of ourselves, not us. But, Lord, You have done in Christ what we could not do for ourselves.

And, Lord, I pray. I pray for those who are here this morning who have never known the gift of a new heart given by Jesus through faith to those who believe.

Lord, I pray that You would help them today to believe and to take hold of this amazing gift. And, Lord, for those of us who know You, Lord, help us to have undivided devotion in a pursuit of righteousness, of a purity of heart, Lord, that is befitting of the grace that You have shown us in Christ.

Lord, help us walk away from unrighteousness. Help us cut out distraction. For, Lord, we want to see You.

[42 : 48] We want to see You by faith. And, we want to see You one day, face to face. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen.