

MATTHEW 5:8

INTRODUCTION

Here is one of those verses in the bible whose depth is immeasurable and whose breadth is impossible to encompass. This is one of the most profound and stunning statements in all of the New Testament. The subject of purity of heart or holiness can be traced in the Bible from Genesis to Revelation.

The theme is infinitely vast and touches on virtually every other biblical truth. It is simply impossible to exhaust its meaning or its significance and my sermon today is no more than an introduction.

1. THE CONTEXT OF THIS SAYING

When Jesus began his earthly ministry, Israel as a nation was in a desperate condition, politically, economically and spiritually. For hundreds of years with only brief respites the nation had been under oppression from foreign powers.

The country had limited freedom to develop its economy and a large part of its income and profit was paid to Rome in taxes. Those were problems that every person saw and felt within their lives.

But there was a less obvious problem that was far worse and that was that the nation was spiritually weak and faithless. However these spiritual problems were not recognised by most of the Jews and in truth the religious leaders thought that their religion was in fine shape. They believed that their coming Messiah would soon solve their political and economic problems.

However in truth Jesus was their Messiah even though they did not recognise him but he came to sort out their spiritual problems for he was interested in their heart problem more than anything else. This is why during his ministry he constantly brought the people to face up to the problem of their heart, to their inward condition rather than their outward condition.

These beatitudes that we are looking at fit that context perfectly for these beatitudes deal with the heart.

2. THE MEANING OF THE SAYING

The word heart translates the Greek word "kardia" from which we get our word cardiac and similar terms. Throughout Scripture as well as in many languages and cultures the heart is used metaphorically to represent the inner person. The heart was considered to be the seat of motives and attitudes, the very centre of our personality. But in the Bible the heart represents much more than emotion and feelings, it also includes the thinking process and particularly the will (Matthew 9:4). The heart is the control centre of mind, will as well as emotion.

In total contrast to the outward superficial and hypocritical religion of the Jewish religious leaders, Jesus said that it's the heart that matters and God requires purity within. That of course was not a new truth but an old one that had been buried in the rubble of ceremony and tradition of the religious of Jesus day (Proverbs 4:23).

The problem that caused God to destroy the earth in the flood was a heart problem (Genesis 6:5). David acknowledged that it was the heart that mattered to God and purity within is what he is looking for (Psalm 51:6 & 10). Jeremiah declared that the heart was deceitful and beyond cure (Jeremiah 17:9-10) and Jesus taught that evil deeds begin in the heart (Matthew 15:19).

So I could go on with proof text after proof text to show that God has always been concerned above all else with the condition of our hearts. Yet so often we even as Christians spend more time being concerned with the outward with what we can see and so little time on what is important our heart attitude before God. Surely those of us who are Christians should make our hearts a priority so that we are spending time examining it and encouraging it and feeding it with godly things.

It is a sad truth that so many of God's people spend hours on the outward and literally minutes on our inner man. The best way to redress this balance is to set time aside each day for reading Christian books as well as praying and reading the scriptures and attending Christian meetings.

The Greek word translated "pure" is "katharos" and it basically means to make pure by cleansing from dirt and filth. The Greek word is related to the Latin word "castus" from which we get our English word "chaste." The related word chasten refers to discipline given in order to correct from wrong behaviour. The Greek term for "pure" was often used of metals that had been refined until all the impurities were removed, leaving only the pure metal.

In that sense purity means unmixed or unadulterated. So the word has a dual meaning it means to cleanse and it means pure in the sense of unmixed or tainted with anything else. Therefore when the term is applied to the heart the idea is that of being made clean and of having pure motives, of being single-minded or undivided devotion.

Double-mindedness has always been one of the great diseases of the church. We want to serve the Lord and follow the world at the same time but that says Jesus that is impossible (Matthew 6:24). James says the same thing in a different way (James 4:4) and he goes on to give us the solution to the problem, which is to be cleansed and to purify our hearts (James 4:8).

However even though there are many times when we who are Christians fail to be single-minded yet we must remember that if we have come to know Christ then we have a heart that does want to be single-minded. We find deep within our hearts a real desire to follow and know our God yet we find ourselves so often being caught up with the world.

We find ourselves doing things that we don't want to do and failing to do things that we long to do. But that is exactly how the great Apostle Paul found things to be in his life (Romans 7:15, 21 & 25). Paul's deepest spiritual desires were pure although the sin dwelling within sometimes overrode those godly desires. But we must not miss the point that those who truly belong to God long for a greater measure of holiness within even though sin hinders the fulfilment of those desires so often.

But purity of heart is more than sincerity. A motive can be sincere yet lead to worthless and sinful things. False religions show great sincerity but their sincerity leads them to the worship of false gods. Some sincere religious people go on pilgrimages or even walk on a bed of nails or climb up mountains on their bare feet doing so sincerely because they think that it will earn them some credit with their god.

But God is not looking for sincerity he is looking for purity within. This is where all religions make the mistake. They think that it is what they do or say that will ultimately please God but in truth it is what our hearts are like that matters. Our hearts are naturally sinful they need to be made pure and cleansed so that they become single-minded in service of God.

There is nothing we can do to cleanse our hearts for we are sinners; God must do it for us. That is why Jesus came into our world and lived and died. He died to pay the price for our sin he died in our place he took God's just punishment for our sins. He rose from the dead for our justification so that we can come to God through Jesus Christ and plead for forgiveness and cleansing. It is only

God that can give us new hearts, clean hearts so that we can be single-minded in our devotion of him.

That is why any religion that does not provide the answer to our sin and deal with our inward being is a false religion. Only God can forgive sin because all sin is ultimately against Him and God can forgive and cleanse us because He has provided the way through His Son Jesus Christ and through His atoning sacrifice and His resurrection.

Therefore I can plead with you today to be clean, to come to God through Christ and receive His forgiveness and His cleansing.

Now this purity that every repentant sinner receives through Christ for it is His purity that we receive must be worked out in practise in our own lives. It must be a practical purity for a purity that is worked out in practise is a true purity. Of course it will always be mixed this side of heaven with impurity but every Christian is called to live holy lives before God, we are called to demonstrate our inward purity with outward purity. So once again we are faced with a dilemma for we know that we cannot live holy lives for we are prone to sin. That is true of every Christian so we must daily rely upon God's power through His Spirit to live holy lives.

When God cleanses us he grants us the Holy Spirit who then empowers us and helps us to resist temptations that before we could not resist and he helps us to think thoughts that before we could not think etc. In fact the first step to living practical holy lives is to realise that we cannot do it on our own. We need to realise that we are unable to practice holiness without God's guidance and power at work within us through His Spirit.

You see some untaught Christians think that once you trust Christ then it's up to you to work it out and they can become so depressed when they find out just how often they fail and just how prone to sin they are. The first step we have to understand is that we are unable to live holy lives without God's power.

Therefore we need to spend time developing our relationship with God, we are united to Christ but that means that we need to know what pleases Him, we need to read his word and commune with him in prayer confessing our daily sins to Him. The bible calls this fellowship, walking with Him and that means following His leading through his Spirit. In Galatians 5:25 we are told to keep in step with the Spirit, we are to follow his leading and rely upon His power. That is only possible through spending time on our own with God, seeking his grace and his power to live practical holy lives in this unholy world.

3. THE RESULT OF HAVING PURE HEARTS

The greatest blessing of those who are pure in heart is that they will see God. The Greek is actually in a tense which means that a literal translation would read like this. "They shall be continuously seeing God for themselves." It is only the pure in heart that see God. Now once again like the previous beatitudes there is a present implication to this promise and a future or ultimate fulfilment of it.

When God in grace works in our hearts and regenerates us we see God by faith. We see him as we have never seen him before. Like Moses who by faith saw the invisible God (Hebrews 11:27) so every born again believer has had his eyes opened to see God through his eyes of faith. Now I don't have to say this but this is not a physical sight but an experiential seeing. We come to know God and understand something about him in a way that we couldn't do before our conversion. We even see his hand in creation more clearly and we see his providence and his purposes more clearly whereas before our conversion such things were never on our minds.

We now have an intimate knowledge of God and we now enjoy daily fellowship with Him but such privileges are reserved only for those who are pure in heart. When our hearts are purified through faith in Christ Jesus, then we begin to live in the presence of God, for He is always with us and we begin to see and to comprehend God with our new spiritual eyes.

We begin to see something of His glory and understand more deeply his character and his attributes. We enjoy intimate and meaningful fellowship with him, a fellowship that is unaffected by our personal circumstances or well-being which is why the pure in heart are blessed.

But of course there is a future aspect to seeing God for we are told in John that “we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2) which is referring to the gloried Son of God the Lord Jesus. But we will also see God in the sense of knowing him and experiencing him and enjoying him in a much fuller and richer and deeper way than we do here on earth. Our relationship with God is affected by sin and by our limitations as human beings but in our glorified state we will see God as we wish to see him and we will know and love and enjoy him as we have longed to do.

But remember as I conclude this is not open to everyone it is only those who are pure in heart, only those who have been cleansed through the blood of Christ. Have you received God’s cleansing through the work of Jesus on the cross? If not you can do so today if you cry out for mercy.

If Christ has cleansed you then are we everyday seeking to root sin out of our lives and seeking to develop and mature our relationship with God. Are we seeing God by faith in ways that we have not seen him before and are we experiencing his presence and blessing in ways that were unknown to us before we came to faith?

We are in a privileged position as Christians, we are truly blessed, we have been cleansed and we see God now by faith and then one day in heaven we shall see him as he is. No wonder Jesus describes such a position as “blessed”.

Amen