

SERMON TITLE – “Blessed are the Pure in Heart”

TEXT – Matthew 5:8

PREACHED AT – Neighbourhood Church

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Well, today we’re back to the beatitudes. In the next two weeks we are going to tackle the remaining two that we have not yet looked at. Earlier in this sermon series James made the distinction between those of Jesus’ statements that seemed to make sense (blessed are the merciful, blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness) and those that do not strike us as logically fitting with the adjective “blessed” (the poor in spirit, those who mourn). With the final two beatitudes we are firmly back on the “makes sense” side. I think we quite rightly associate being pure in heart and peacemaking with blessing. But as with all of the other beatitudes, there is a radically countercultural dimension to Jesus’ words.

Today, our text comes from Matthew 5:8:

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Before we begin, I think it’s important to discuss one common understanding of how the beatitudes work that I think has some truth in it, but can also lead down some dangerous paths. It’s very easy to read the beatitudes as a straightforward description of cause and effect: if you do *x*, then *y* will follow. “If you are poor in spirit, you will obtain the kingdom of heaven.” “If you mourn, you will be comforted.” “If you are merciful, you will be shown mercy.” Well, it doesn’t take much observation of the world to discover that this isn’t how it works—at least not now. Plenty of people mourn and are not comforted. Plenty of people show mercy but are not shown mercy in return. The poor in spirit often feel little more than just poor. And we could go on down the list.

We need to recognize that Jesus is not dispensing timeless truths about the consequences of human behaviour in the beatitudes; rather, they are an announcement that something is starting to happen in the world, that the world is being made new and that this is being inaugurated through him. The beatitudes are not descriptions or techniques telling us how to obtain “blessing” by applying the proper procedures to our lives—they are not mechanical formulas for getting what we want. Rather, as N.T. Wright has said,

They are a summons to live in the present in the way that will make sense in God’s promised future; because that future has arrived in the present of Jesus of Nazareth. It may seem upside down, but we are called to believe, with great daring, that it is in fact the right way up.

The difference I’m arguing for here is a very subtle one, but I think it is crucially important. In the first view, living according to the beatitudes is something that I do so that I can attain a desired outcome (blessing) for myself. In the second view, living according to the beatitudes is an appropriate response to the way the world was intended to be and will one day be. In the first view, it is *my* blessing that is the focus, in the

second it is God's intention for the world and for human beings. And the really great thing is that if we focus on the second, the first will be one of the benefits. As we become kingdom people, as we become more authentically human by resisting the false alternatives on offer around us, we will be "blessed" in the process, not necessarily in the sense of having radically improved circumstances or a life free from hardship, but in the sense of "seeing" God, seeing the beauty of him who is light and in whom "no darkness" is found (1 John 1:5).

Okay, so on to today's text. Matthew 5:8 is a short passage of scripture, but there's a lot going on in one little verse. As with all of the beatitudes, there are two clauses – the first dealing with what is blessed, the second dealing with the "for" part. So, once again:

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

So what does it mean to be pure in heart? I'm going to tackle this question a bit differently today. Rather than first explaining the passage and then applying it to the present, I'm going to look at the human tendencies revealed through observation of our contemporary world first, and then come back to the beatitude and revisit the question of what it means to be pure in heart. In a sense, I'm going to (hopefully) paint a picture of the "disease" first, and then move to the "cure" offered by Jesus in this beatitude.

We live in a society that it is obsessed with the show, with the spectacle, with external presentation. From movies, to the hundreds of television channels competing with one another to fill hundreds of hours with the most entertaining content, to the omnipresent mass media delivered through the Ethernet providing us with endless streams of information and entertainment at the click of a mouse... Multiple billions of dollars are spent annually in the never-ending quest to keep you and I entertained.

This is nowhere more obvious than in the spectacle that has been going on for the past couple of weeks in Beijing. Estimates on what the Chinese have spent on these games range from \$18-upwards of \$40 billion dollars depending on how much is included in the estimates. That's a huge amount of money to put on a show!

But China is not simply paying this money to host an adequate athletic event. Everything we see on our televisions—from the spectacular opening ceremonies, to the stunning architecture of the facilities, to the athletic performances themselves—the entire spectacle is one enormous exercise in image-management.

China is desperate to portray themselves in a very specific way: they want their nation to be seen by the world as technologically proficient, economically powerful, a good place to do business, a modern, powerful nation full of highly competent, fulfilled citizens. What the Chinese government wants us to see in Beijing is a glorious spectacle, a sparkling, efficient modern metropolis, an athletic powerhouse—a world power that embodies all that is good and virtuous about the world.

Of course, as we've seen, this has led to some "creative" means of enhancing the show. Chinese officials have admitted that the breathtaking display of fireworks that accompanied the opening ceremonies was at least partially digitally enhanced to make it appear more spectacular on television. Even worse, in the minds of some people, the adorable little girl that captured everyone's heart with her beauty and angelic voice at the ceremony turned out to be lip-synching; the little girl to whom the beautiful voice actually belonged was not deemed pretty enough for television. Appearances are important, after all, and China had a very specific image that they wanted to get across.

Well we know that no nation is as "pure" as they present themselves. Despite the enormous amount of resources that have been poured into making sure that China puts on a good face for the world, we know that all is not well. Poverty, pollution, economic injustice, and political unrest are all there lurking beneath the surface, just out of the gaze of the TV camera, no matter how carefully the authorities attempt to screen these from the world's view.

Any dissent or protest, any challenge to China's foreign policy, any questioning of their involvement in war zones like Sudan or their human rights record in general etc has been carefully kept away from the public view. China's "purity," while impressive and carefully constructed, is an external one that many feel is not exactly an accurate representation of the values communicated by their actual policies and actions.

Of course this lack of harmony between appearance and reality is readily apparent in the religious realm as well. Perhaps you've seen the story of BC native Todd Bentley unfold over the last couple of weeks. For those unfamiliar with Bentley, he is a self-proclaimed "faith healer" operating out of Florida, running these massive healing extravaganzas in packed stadiums around the USA. Those in his ministry have described him as having a "special anointing" and he is famous for flamboyantly and even violently waging war on the demonic on stage. Some have likened his events to WWF-type spectacles.

Yet Bentley is also the latest in a long line of flashy religious leaders who been forced to exit the stage as a result of marital infidelity. He has recently separated from his wife and his "ministry" is in limbo. One more carefully crafted religious identity evaporating due to a lack of consistency between heart and action.

Of course it's easy to pick on the hypocrisy we see in the Olympic spectacle and in flashy television evangelists. But what about us? Do we also fall into the temptation to load up on the external at the expense of the internal? We human beings have always been masters of managing our public personas, of appearing a certain way to the world around us despite what may or may not be going on in the inside.

Technology has made this easier for us than ever—the advent of Facebook, myspace pages, personal blogs and the like have made it possible for anyone with a computer and time to spare to carefully craft an online identity that communicates exactly what we want to reveal about ourselves, no more and no less. We can put up only the most attractive pictures of ourselves (with a little touch-up from Photo Shop if necessary), we

can spend hours making sure that we sound more eloquent and sophisticated than we would come across in person. We can associate ourselves with other sites and products that we feel will enhance how others perceive us. Our online identities can be carefully constructed so that we can appear as “pure” as we would like to. The end result of each of the above stories is the same: **an external product that cannot possibly live up to or adequately reflect the internal reality.**

And this gets us back to this morning’s beatitude:

*Blessed are the pure **in heart**, for they shall see God.*

When we look at the context into which Jesus was speaking, our understanding of “pure in heart” comes into sharper focus. Jesus was a Jew, and he was speaking into a primarily Jewish context. And for a first-century Jewish listener, the word “pure” would undoubtedly conjure up a very specific set of images - images of ceremonial cleanliness, proper ritual observance, and carefully preserved national and religious identity.

Israel was well-acquainted with purity. The books of Moses are full of detailed instructions about how to remain pure among the other nations. From what they could eat, to how they could make their clothes, to the kinds of utensils and materials that were used in the tabernacle (and, later, the temple), to what was to be sacrificed and how it was to be done, Israel was to be a nation set-apart. They were not to become seduced by the idols of their neighbours, nor were they to marry their women or adopt their practices.

Purity was a *big deal* for first-century Israel.

By Jesus’ time, the religious elite (the Pharisees) had devised a whole new set of laws for the people to follow, a whole parallel system of evaluating who was “pure” and who was not. The Jewish people were under Roman rule at this point and there were a variety of different understandings of what it meant to be faithful to God when they were no longer a nation. Some resorted to violent revolutionary activity, some tried to ingratiate themselves to the Romans, while others fled to the caves to live a life of isolation from the contamination of the broader society.

The Pharisees’ response was to ramp up their devotion to the law—to interpreting and following it properly—and to focus on purity. They got upset if certain rituals—such as hand washing, or proper Sabbath observance—weren’t done correctly. Jesus said they were great at tithing but paid no attention to love, truth, mercy, and justice. Jesus also said of them, “You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean.” (Matt. 23:27)

Sound familiar?

Into this context, and to people who would have had all this operating in the background, Jesus says, “Blessed are the pure in heart.” What does he mean by “in heart?” Jesus is obviously not referring to the organ that pumps blood to the rest of our body—this isn’t the “heart” that Jesus is saying ought to be pure (although it certainly wouldn’t hurt). In

the first-century world, **the heart was considered the region of thought, intention, and moral disposition.** While today it's usage may have vague sentimental connotations, historically "the heart" has represented the core of one's being.

And *this* is where we are to be pure. *This* is to be the primary object of our attention. Jesus is here (and elsewhere in the Gospels) telling us not to make a show of our purity, not to advertise our holiness to those around us. Rather than obsessing about how we are perceived by others we are to strive for a deep correspondence between our motivations, thoughts, and convictions and the self that we present to the world around us.

When Jesus said "blessed are the pure in heart" he was not saying that in order to see God we have to muster up a prescribed amount of purity of heart. He was attacking the all-too-human tendency to focus on the surface; he was saying that our concern must go beyond the external purity that is relatively easy to produce and manage.

Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.

God knows we are not holy, that cannot be completely pure—at least not on this side of the new creation. He knows that we are dust, that we are sinners, and that our righteousness is like filthy rags when compared to his ultimate standard.

But what purity we are, by God's grace, able to achieve is to be purity of *heart*—of thought, intention, and moral disposition—rather than an external purity put on to impress others in a carefully choreographed exercise in image production and maintenance.

The shallowness, superficiality, and hypocrisy so rampant in our culture is *not* to characterize disciples of Jesus. We are to resist our culture's preoccupation with appearances and cultivate a purity that comes from the heart, from the center of who we are which is then reflected outward in lives of **integrity, honesty, humility,** and ultimately, **dependence upon a God whose holiness is the basis for our trust.**

So what about the last part of this morning's text?

Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.

This is an amazing promise. The pure in heart shall see God and others shall see God through them. By refusing to bow down to the idol of self, to the gods of a culture that often values style over substance, we point to God, we reflect his image to the world around us. We see God in lives of integrity and purity of heart. We see his kingdom coming on earth as it is in heaven, we see his intentions for the world being realized, a world where human beings properly relate to God, to others, and to the world around them. **When human lives are lived as God intended them to be lived, God is glorified and seen most clearly.**

Ultimately, purity of heart is much more difficult than external purity isn't it? It's relatively easy for a nation to put on an impressive show and sweep its problems under the carpet for a few weeks once every four years; it's much more difficult to do the hard work of promoting justice, equity, opportunity, and compassion for the millions of people under your care.

It's relatively easy to dazzle people with a religious performance and generate enormous amounts in donations along the way; it's much more difficult to be committed to your family, to do the hard work of loving those closest to you in the spirit of Christ as he commands.

It's relatively easy to create an attractive online profile; it's much more difficult to live a life of transparency and honesty before God and others.

It's relatively easy to lay all of these things out in a Sunday morning sermon; it's much more difficult live them out once I leave these doors and go into another week where the temptation to "look good" is sometimes difficult to resist.

It's relative easy to appear pure; it's much more difficult to be pure in heart.

May God help us to strive for a purity of heart that transcends the division between interior and exterior that we so readily construct in order to guard our true selves from others and to appear different than we really are. May God help us to live honestly and transparently before others. Most of all, may God help us to acknowledge and depend upon him as the only one who is truly pure, the one in whom we place our trust and in whom our hope is found.

Thanks be to God.