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Bridgeway Church
The Beatitudes #4
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Sermon Summary #4

So, You Want to See God? Matthew 5:8

I want to begin today's message with something a bit out of the ordinary, something that you may at first think has no connection to the text of Scripture we are looking at this morning.

A survey was recently conducted by the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University. Its results are shocking. A plurality of adults (48%) believe that if a person is generally good, or does enough good things during their life, they will "earn" a place in heaven. Only one-third of adults (35%) disagree.

52% of Americans who describe themselves as Christian also accept a "works-oriented" means to God's acceptance. Almost half of all adults associated with Pentecostal (46%), mainline Protestant (44%), and evangelical (41%) churches, as well as nearly two-thirds of Catholics (70%), hold that view.

While about 65% of American adults describe themselves as Christians, only about half (54%) believe they will experience heaven after they die. Only one-third of adults (33%) believe they will go to heaven solely because of confessing their sins and embracing Jesus as their savior. Another one-in-five expecting to experience heaven are counting on earning their way in or because they embrace universalism (i.e., that God will let all people into heaven).

15% said they don't know what will happen after they die. 13% said there is no life after death. 8% expect to be reincarnated; and another 8% believe they will go to a place of purification prior to entering heaven. A mere 2% believe they will go to hell. Only 20% of people age 18 to 29 believe that when they die they will go to heaven only because they have confessed their sins and have accepted Jesus as their savior. 30% of those 30 to 49 and 40% of adults 50 and older hold that belief. (As reported by Joe Carter, www.thegospelcoalition.org).

This survey suggests that too many professing Christians aren't Christians at all. They are not trusting in the finished work of Christ but in their own works. Perhaps the primary reason for such devastating confusion about the gospel is that they haven't actually *heard* the gospel.

I draw your attention to this survey simply to reinforce the eternally urgent and critical truth that salvation and the forgiveness of sins and our entrance into eternal glory are based not on our works, however good or many they may be, but rather based on our singular trust and faith in who Jesus is and what he has done for us in living a sinless life and dying a substitutionary death in our place.

The reason why it's important to remember once again this vital Christian truth is that some continue to read the Beatitudes as if they are entrance requirements for the kingdom of God. Do these things often enough, so they think, and you will be counted worthy of eternal life.

But as I said in our first week in the Beatitudes, these virtues, these characteristics described by Jesus are not what you do or what you become in order to gain access into the kingdom of heaven. *They are the defining features of those who have already been forgiven and saved based on the work of Jesus Christ.* If I may be allowed once again to emphasize the relationship between salvation by grace and the good works we perform, look at Ephesians 2:8-10.

“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:8-10).

Paul states it clearly: salvation is *“not as a result of works”* but salvation is *“for good works.”* Do you understand that distinction? It is absolutely crucial that you do.

If that is the case, what does Jesus mean when he pronounces as blessed those who are pure in heart? What does he mean when he says that the inheritance of such people is the vision or sight of God? Perhaps the best way to answer this is by contrasting the perspective of Jesus with that of the Pharisees and religious leaders of his day. Jesus said this about them:

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! 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” (Matt. 23:25-28).

Ask yourself this question: Would Jesus be pleased with a world in which no adultery existed? The answer is: Only partly so. We read this in his Sermon on the Mount:

“You have heard that it was 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” (Matt. 5:27-28).

Yes, of course, the actual physical sin of sexual immorality mattered much to Jesus. But he was even more concerned with the state of one's heart. It really shouldn't surprise us, therefore, that Jesus said to his disciples and to us, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matt. 5:8). He doesn't say, “Blessed are the physically fit” or “Blessed are the bold and beautiful” or “Blessed are the fashionably dressed.” It isn't perfection of the body, says Jesus, but purity of the heart that evokes God's blessing and assures us of the promise of seeing God.

Our approach to this short verse of Scripture will be to ask of it seven questions, and then to provide what I hope are seven biblical, corresponding answers.

Seven Questions

(1) Our first question is simple enough: “What is the heart?”

Jesus is not talking about the physical organ in your chest. He's not saying that if you suffer from congestive heart failure or a-fib or high blood pressure or arterial sclerosis that you will never see God. Furthermore, and contrary to what many believe, the “heart” is not the opposite of the “head.” Jesus is not saying that purity need not extend to our minds and to what we think. *Often in Scripture “heart” and “head” or “heart” and “mind” are synonymous and interchangeable* (see 2 Cor. 3:14-15). For example:

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight” (Ps. 19:14a).

“But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, ‘Why do you think evil in your hearts?’” (Matt. 9:4)

The “heart” is often portrayed as hard, foolish, darkened, and unbelieving (see Mark 3:5; Rom. 1:21; 2:5; Eph. 4:18; Heb. 3:12), as well as being the seat of faith (Rom. 10:6-10). Conviction of sin is experienced in the heart (Acts 2:37). The “heart” is opened to understand and enjoy the truth of the gospel (Acts 16:14). It is into the “heart” that God shines the light of his saving grace that brings the knowledge of Christ (2 Cor. 4:6). The Holy Spirit indwells our “hearts” and bears witness to the fact that we are God’s children (2 Cor. 1:22; see Gal. 4:6-7). God pours his love into our “hearts” (Rom. 5:5) and there Christ dwells through faith (Eph. 3:17).

The “heart” is the source of obedience to God (Rom. 6:17; 2 Thess. 3:5) and the place where God’s word is kept and treasured (Luke 8:15). It is in and over the “heart” that the peace of Christ rules (Col. 3:15). Grace strengthens the “heart” (Heb. 13:9).

Simply put, the heart is the center of our personality and encompasses our minds, our wills, our affections, and our hoping. With the heart we think, choose, desire, cherish, prize, value, treasure, and enjoy. No wonder that Solomon said this in Proverbs 4:23 – “Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.”

(2) Here is our second question: “Why does the heart need to be purified?”

That’s the easiest one of all to answer:

“The intention of man’s heart is evil from his youth” (Gen. 8:21).

“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jer. 17:9).

“Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander” (Matt. 15:17-18; see also Rom. 1:21; 2:5; Eph. 4:17-18).

(3) Third: “What kind of purification does the heart need?”

In one sense, all Christians are already pure in heart.

“And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them [the Gentiles], by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith” (Acts 15:8-9).

Here Peter is describing justification by faith alone. Through faith in Jesus both Jew and Gentile have their hearts cleansed and declared righteous. But the purity in view in Matthew 5:8 is not so much a completed possession as it is a current, on-going project. It is not *imputed* righteousness but *imparted* righteousness that Jesus has in mind. It is not justification but sanctification that is in view. In other words, Matthew 5:8 has in view our experiential communion with Christ. It is very similar to what we read in Hebrews 12:14,

“Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14).

(4) Our fourth question is this: “What does purity of heart involve?”

Or we could as easily ask: What does a pure heart look like? How is it to be known or recognized?

First, and this may sound somewhat paradoxical, *the person who is pure in heart is the person who mourns over the impurity of his/her heart*. To be pure in heart begins with the humble and sincere confession that, apart from God’s grace, one is spiritually bankrupt (Matt. 5:3). To be pure in heart is to hunger and thirst after righteousness (Matt. 5:6). To be pure in heart is not absolute, sinless perfection, but rather the grace-empowered pursuit of it (Phil. 3:12-14). To be pure in heart is to engage in an on-going, never-ending pursuit of holiness, in the power of God’s grace. It is a pursuit of holiness in which we are never satisfied. Our hunger for holiness is never fully filled. Our thirst for holiness is never altogether quenched. The pure in heart may sin, indeed, will sin, but they take no comfort in it; they feel no complacency in it.

Second, the pure in heart is the person who is pure *inwardly, not merely outwardly*. Simply being civil and law-abiding is not what Jesus had in mind. Listen to the wise and perceptive comments of D. A. Carson:

“Purity of heart must never be confused with outward conformity to rules. Because it is the heart which must be pure, this beatitude interrogates us with awkward questions like these: ‘What do you think about when your mind slips into neutral? How much sympathy do you have for deception, no matter how skillful? For shady humor, no matter how funny? To what do you pay consistent allegiance? What do you want more than anything else? What and whom do you love? To what extent are your actions and words accurate reflections of what is in your heart? To what extent do your actions and words constitute a cover-up for what is in your heart?’” (*The Sermon on the Mount*, 25).

Third, the pure in heart love, honor, and obey God with the *whole* of their heart. Although purity of heart is never to be reduced to civility, it certainly results in it. The pure in heart must never be half-hearted in their devotion.

“Blessed are those who keep his testimonies, who seek him with their whole heart” (Ps. 119:2).

Fourth, the pure in heart *hate sin*. It is always possible to leave your sin, yet still love it. Like a rattlesnake that sheds its skin but retains its poisonous venom, so also some cease from evil but wish they hadn’t.

Fifth, we see something of what it means to be pure in heart from David’s statement in Psalm 24:

Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully” (Ps. 24:3-4).

For David, a pure heart is one that hates “what is false.” A pure heart “does not swear deceitfully.” A little farther down in the psalm David describes the pure in heart as the one who seeks “the face of the God of Jacob” (v. 6).

(5) Our fifth question is this: “How do we obtain purity of heart?”

We must remember that whatever purity of heart we attain, it is always the gift of God’s grace. But God does appoint certain means or methods or instruments for us.

First, is the Word of God itself:

“How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word. With my whole heart I seek you; let me not wander from your commandments! I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you” (Ps. 119:9-11; cf. John 17:17).

The purpose of a water purifier is to eliminate impurities and alien elements from what you drink. So also the Scriptures serve to process our thoughts and desires and impulses and remove the sinful impurities from our lives. If someone were to ask why I insist on preaching from Scripture, verse by verse, I could simply point them to Psalm 119:9-11 (along with dozens of others). If I were of a mind to do it, I could develop and form a whole congregation of extremely religious people. All it would take is a neglect of Scripture and a focus on rules and fashion and human will power. But extremely religious people often go to hell.

Second, if we want to be pure in heart we must walk and talk and develop close accountable relationships with people who desire the same thing. As Proverbs says, “Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm” (Prov. 13:20).

Third, we must continually pray for a pure heart. As David cried, so must we: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me” (Ps. 51:10).

Fourth, we must deal ruthlessly with whatever there is in our lives that provokes us to sin. See Matthew 5:29-30.

“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. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell” (Matt. 5:29-30).

Fifth, we must continuously fix our thoughts and minds on Jesus.

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:1-2).

(6) Our sixth question, and perhaps the most important one of all, is this: “Why bother? Why is it so important? What is to be gained by purity of heart?”

There are numerous reasons why we should be devoted to the pursuit of heart purity. (1) We are to be holy because God is holy (1 Pet. 1:16). (2) It is the goal of our election: God “chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him” (Eph. 1:4; see Rom. 8:29; 1 Pet. 1:1-2). (3) It is the purpose for which Christ died: he “gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works” (Titus 2:14). But the primary reason for pursuing purity is stated in the second half of our verse: “Blessed are the pure in heart, *for they shall see God!*” (Matt. 5:8).

It’s fascinating to trace the development in Scripture of God’s people “seeing” him. We are initially told in Exodus 33 that to see God’s face is to die:

“Moses said, ‘Please show me your glory.’ And he 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 the LORD said, ‘Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen’” (Exod. 33:18-23).

God is spirit. He is, by nature, invisible. Paul described God as the one “who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see” (1 Tim. 5:16).

Any time a person is said to have “seen” God it is always an *indirect or mediated or partial sight*. The disciples saw God in the person of Jesus. This was only possible because the inner essence of the divine nature was obscured, as it were, by the human flesh of the incarnate Son. John the Apostle said this: “No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known” (John 1:18). To see Jesus is to see God, but not in his unmediated fullness, because what is by nature invisible is, by definition, “un-seeable”.

So when Jesus says that the pure in heart “shall see God” he means more than simply physical vision. To “see” God is to experience him in the deepest and most intimate way possible. To see God is to know him through the variety of ways in which he has made himself accessible to us: in creation (we “see” God in nature, in the vast reaches of the distant galaxies, in the unimaginably complex world of sub-atomic particle physics); and we “see” him in his providence and his power in miracles. We “see” God when we receive and rest in his grace:

“Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud; be gracious to me and answer me! You have said, ‘Seek my face.’ My heart says to you, ‘Your face, LORD, do I seek.’ Hide not your face from me. Turn not your servant away in anger, O you who have been my help. Cast me not off; forsake me not, O God of my salvation!” (Psalm 27:7-9).

In saying, “Hide not your face from me” David is in essence saying: “Be gracious to me! Let me feel and enjoy and find satisfaction in your kindness and mercy and forgiving love.” So when Jesus says that the pure in heart will “see” God he means that we will be granted unmediated access to the glory of God. Jesus prayed: “Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world” (John 17:24).

When we finally arrive in the new heavens and new earth, the greatest and most glorious blessing of all will be ours. According to Revelation 22:3-5,

“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. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever” (Revelation 22:3-5).

I believe the one whose “face” we will see is Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, who is the perfect reflection and expression of the Father. **There is nothing in or about God the Father that you will want to see that you will fail to see when you gaze into the face of Jesus himself!**

(7) Our seventh and final question is this: “What will the sight of our great God and Savior be like? What will it do for us? How will it feel?”

I believe we can identify three characteristics of what theologians call the “beatific vision” of God:

First, it will be utterly transparent, in the sense that it will be clear and pristine and unhindered. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13, “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known” (1 Cor. 13:12). Nothing will obscure our sight of God or hinder our ability to feel his presence and power and beauty in all their fullness.

Second, it will be altogether transcendent. It will in every conceivable respect transcend and exceed the glory and beauty and majesty of anything we have ever seen on this earth. It will infinitely surpass any and all joy we have experienced from the sight of anything and everything in all of creation. It will be so utterly transcendent that we will never grow weary of gazing on him and basking in his glory. I’ve seen Paris from the top of the Eiffel Tower (I was there in 1978). The Hubble telescope gives us sight of unimaginably massive galaxies, billions of light years away. Although I have not yet been to the Grand Canyon, standing at its edge, I am told, is utterly breathtaking. But everything we have already seen or hope to see pales in comparison with the sight of the God who made it all and sustains it all.

Third, it will be totally transforming. We read in 1 John 3,

“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, **because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure**” (1 Jn 3:1-3).

Earlier I asked how we might grow in purity of heart, by what means might we obtain it more and more. Here we are told that one way is by fixing our hope on the return of Jesus, on the prospect of seeing him face to face. Hope set on Jesus “purifies” the human heart to be as pure as Jesus is himself.

Conclusion

Experiencing an ever-increasing purity of heart comes only to those who turn from reliance on themselves, repudiate any notion that they can make themselves worthy of acceptance with God, and trust entirely in the all-sufficiency of Jesus Christ in his life, death, and resurrection. Purity of heart is absolutely necessary if we hope to see God.

To say that practical holiness of life or purity of heart is necessary for us to see God and to enter the kingdom of heaven, sounds like salvation by works. The solution is found in the distinction between the root of our salvation and the fruit of our salvation. Or we could say it is the difference between the cause of our salvation and the consequence of it. The root cause of our salvation is God’s grace leading us to faith in Jesus. The fruit or consequence of our salvation are the good works that grow or proceed from a heart that has been born again. Our good deeds, our display of mercy and hunger after righteousness and commitment to peace-making are the evidence of what God has graciously done in saving us through faith alone.

But what if someone says they are saved, claims to have trusted Christ for forgiveness, but they never display the fruit of the Spirit; they never show any signs of personal transformation? This is where I need to be extraordinarily careful in how I answer. If someone claims to have trusted Christ, even though they show little evidence in their life of the sort of godly transformation that is described in the Beatitudes, I will not tell them that they aren’t saved. But

neither will I give them the assurance that they are. They *may* be born again. But if so, they will eventually come under ever-increasing conviction from the Holy Spirit and will gradually produce the sort of godly fruit that the Bible describes. But in the absence of repentance and indications of a transformed life, I will not assure them they are saved.