

Purity, Peacemaking, and Persecution

Let's turn together to Matt. 5 as we make our way through the sermon on the mount. When Pontius Pilate was interrogating Jesus, at one point he asked Jesus, *are you the King of the Jews?* Jesus answered him, *My kingdom is not of this world.* (John 18:36) Jesus is the king of a glorious and eternal kingdom and the sermon on the mount teaches Christians how we are to live according to the kingdom of heaven's ethics, morals, and values. In the first 12 verses - what we call the beatitudes - Jesus describes the character qualities that the kingdom of heaven values. Jesus begins with character because he is always more interested in what we are than what we do. What we do is important, but only to the degree that it flows from what we are.

British writer G.K. Chesterton once wrote, *"The word 'good' has many meanings. For example, if a man were to shoot his grandmother at a range of five hundred yards, I should call him a good shot, but not necessarily a good man."*

If you'll forgive the analogy, sometimes in the church we can focus on being a good shot: we go to church, tithe, sing, and read our bibles, so we must be a good Christian. Those things are good, but they don't necessarily make us good. Not inside, not who we are, not at the core of our being, our character. Jesus doesn't just want to get us into his kingdom, he wants to get his kingdom into us, changing us from the inside out. Let's take a moment to ask the Spirit to open our hearts and do that work in us this morning.

Heavenly Father, we open our hearts to the Holy Spirit's transforming power this morning. We don't want to go through the motions. We don't want to give you lip service. We want Your Word to speak to us on the deepest levels and change us from the inside out, making us more like Jesus - not just in what we do, but in what we are. Convict us of sin - especially the deeper, less obvious sins that have a grip on our affections and attitudes and motives - and lead us to true repentance, that we might experience Your grace, Your forgiveness, and Your presence in a new way this morning. Work on our character and make us more like Jesus, for it's in his name we pray. Amen.

Let's pick up this morning in Matt. 5 verse 8-12: *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.*

The next character quality Jesus highlights is a pure heart.

1. Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God (vs. 8)

When we hear "pure in heart" the first thing we might think of is sexual and moral purity, and that is certainly included in the meaning. But the emphasis of the phrase *pure in heart* is on our relationship with God, walked out in a singleness and sincerity of heart that goes to the core of our being.

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. (Psalm 24:3-4 ESV).

Relationship with God (ascending the hill of the Lord) requires clean hands and a pure heart, a heart that does not act or speak falsely or deceitfully. And yet, those familiar with their Bibles will immediately think of Jer. 17:9 which says, *the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure*. How can we have a pure heart when the Bible says that something is terminally wrong with our hearts and they are deceitful above all things and beyond cure?

Our hearts are beyond any earthly cure. There is no program or discipline or counseling session that can cure our hearts of their disease. But the power of God can. Jesus came to cleanse our hearts and change our hearts so that sin no longer rules us the way it did. Jesus gives us a pure heart by pardoning us of all our sins. Then he gives us the Holy Spirit to empower us to live a new and transformed life out of a new and transformed heart:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. Then you will live in the land I gave your ancestors; you will be my people, and I will be your God. Ezek. 36:25-28

Notice the progression here. God cleanses us, which he did that through the blood of Jesus Christ shed for us, then He empowers us by giving us a new heart and His Spirit within us. And the result is restored relationship: *you will be my people and I will be your God. (vs. 28)*

The more we are filled with the Holy Spirit, the purer our heart becomes. We have a singleness of heart - our hearts aren't clogged up with a lot of worldly things that blind us to the worth of Christ. Idolatry doesn't necessarily mean we deny Christ, it can just be that small things becomes bigger to us than Christ because they're so close to us. A dime can block our view of the sun if it's brought close enough to the eye. That's what idolatry is: little things becoming more important to us than God because they fill our vision. Rather than having a single heart - a pure heart - for God, we have a heart clogged and cluttered with so many lesser things. We need the power of the Holy Spirit to cleans out our clogged hearts and give us a single heart again.

For the past week or so one of our gas stove burners wasn't igniting. The spark was there, and the gas was there but it couldn't ignite because the hole that allowed the gas to get to the spark was clogged. I had to clean out the clog and then it fired right up. Our hearts so easily get clogged up with other things that keep the power of the Holy Spirit from igniting in our lives. Jesus doesn't seem so great to us, God doesn't seem so real to us. The gospel doesn't seem so important to us. The problem isn't with God. It's with our hearts - they're clogged up with other stuff - maybe even good stuff that's gotten too large in our eyes - and we need to bring that to God in honest repentance and ask the Spirit to cleanse us and give us a pure heart, a single heart for God.

The other quality of a pure heart is sincerity. A pure heart is walking with God in honest sincerity. There can be no purity without sincerity. In ancient Rome, sculpting was a popular form of art and sometimes less experienced craftsmen would cover their errors with wax so the customer couldn't see the flaws. To assure customers they weren't being ripped off, legitimate sculptors would mark their statues with the words *sine cera* - "without wax".

Someone once said "God can't bless unreality." We can cover our flaws outwardly with all kinds of wax, but God doesn't look at the outward, He always looks at the inner reality, He looks at our heart. Jesus quotes Isaiah when he prophesied, *These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.* Matt. 15:8 God never just listens to what our lips are saying, He listens to what our hearts are saying.

Here's what God is after: He wants us to put away the wax, stop playing games, and get real with Him. That's what God can bless, that's what God can work with. Confessing our sins is walking in the light because we're bringing the sin that's going on in our hearts and lives and we're willingly exposing it to God and saying, "here, this is really where I'm at! Forgive me God! Cleanse me God! Set me free from this garbage God!"

And 1 John 1:9 says that when we rip the wax off and get real with God by confessing our sin, that God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. Why? To restore our fellowship with Him. To restore our sense of God's presence, His power and presence in our lives.

Jesus is saying those whose walk with God is "without wax" will see God - will have a genuine relationship with God. Yes, Jesus is talking about that glorious day when the pure in heart will stand unafraid before the living God and be with Him forever. But he is also talking in a here and now sense: the pure in heart will see God active and powerful in their lives. As we walk by the Spirit, in sincerity, we will experience a renewed fellowship with God. We will begin to see Him moving in our lives again. We will begin to see Him use us to help others know His power in their lives. We begin to see small - and sometimes large - miracles from God.

If you feel like you're not seeing God's active work going on in your life much, if you are feeling the presence of God becoming less and less real to you, be honest with yourself and examine: are there things I'm covering up? Are there sins I'm hiding behind closed doors? Ask God to forgive you, cleanse you, and give you a pure heart. God is ready to meet us when we're single minded and sincere - when we seek Him with all our hearts.

2. *Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God (vs. 9)*

This is a quality that also has to do with relationship: only this time between us and others. Jesus is saying that when the quality of our character is that of a peacemaker, we actually resemble our heavenly Father, because He also is a peacemaker. The Bible calls Him the God of peace - where God rules and reigns, there is peace. God sent His Son in order to break down the walls of hostility between us and Him that we may have peace with God. As believers, we are bound together in the bond of peace.

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Ephesians 4:1-3 ESV)

Paul had firsthand experience with churches that were being torn apart by division and gossip and contention and spiritual pride. Paul warns the Galatian church, *If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.* This is kind of the cannibalistic version of Jesus' statement, *if*

you live by the sword, you will die by the sword. If you live by devouring, the day will come when you're going to be on someone else's menu.

I have a friend who recently spent some time with his extended family, and he was so grieved when he left. Family tensions, power struggles, and insecurities have festered so long that the relationships have grown toxic. People aren't speaking to each other. Some spouses refuse to be a part of the family gatherings because they've been so hurt. Anger and mean-spiritedness, along with a lack of grace or generosity towards each other is devouring the family relationships. This didn't happen overnight - it probably began with a little backbiting here, a little gossip there, a little taking sides over here. Now the family is being torn apart and it's pretty sad.

The same thing can happen in churches. It's not at all uncommon for churches to be literally torn apart by divisions, gossiping, power struggles, and mean-spiritedness. Many churches that were once full and healthy are now empty or nearly empty because of divisions, their deteriorating buildings a silent testimony of the power of the devil rather than the power of God.

Grace, let's commit to be a peace-making church. Let's seek to look like our Father, and work for relational peace when possible. I don't mean that we become a "peace at all costs" kind of church. Next week we'll talk about how Jesus calls us to stand out, not blend in. Sometimes standing for the truth will cause division. Jesus said in Matthew 10:34 *"Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword."* If we just read that, we might think that Jesus wants us to be inflammatory figures, instigating disruption and fighting. But that's not at all what Jesus means - he's not contradicting Matt. 5:9. As you read on, it's clear that the dividing line is that one person has chosen to follow Jesus and others don't. Sometimes that will cause deep division, not because the believer is disrespectful or condemning, but because the unbelievers refuse to accept their decision to follow Jesus. That is a cost we have to be willing to pay. But our witness is to be one of love, respect, and consideration, not flame-throwing disruption and division.

Kingdom character will make us peacemakers not peace breakers. This is about our character, not necessarily the results. We can't always make peace but we should always be doing as much as we can to be peacemakers. Rom. 12:18 gives us this advice, *If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. (NIV)*

One of my favorite quotes from SuperBowl 46 when the Patriots lost to the Giants 21-17 (great game) came from quarterback Tom Brady's wife, supermodel Gisele Bundchen who in frustration blurted out "you have to catch the ball when you're supposed to catch the ball. My husband cannot throw the ball and catch the ball at the same time."

We're only ever one half of a relationship - we can't throw the ball and catch it too in relationships. But to the degree that it depends on us, Jesus calls us to do what we can to mend relationships, to strengthen relationships, to be peacemakers, not peacebreakers.

The heart of a peacemaker

- a. **Walk in humility** - pride is the biggest relationship killer. If you have a string of broken relationships in your wake, especially if you look back and think, "I did nothing wrong. It was

everybody else's fault" you probably have a serious problem with pride. The Bible says that God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Don't protect your pride, protect your supply of God's grace! Humble yourself and receive God's grace again.

- b. **Value other people** - a peacemaker values relationship enough to treat others with respect and courtesy. The word courtesy isn't found in the Bible, but concept of it is. Doing unto others as we would have them do to us is a framework of courtesy.
- c. **When you have a problem with someone, go to them about it** - the implication in the word "peacemakers" is that there is conflict to work through. There's no need for peacemakers where there is no conflict or offense or difference to work through. Jesus commands us to go to those we have an offense against, or if we know they have an offense against us but I think this is one of the most disobeyed verses in the Bible. As a pastor, I can't count how many times, in all the churches I've been involved in, that I've heard about offenses that one person has against another but they will not go to them and they will not forgive them. That is disobeying God's word! Compound onto that, often we add gossip to the mix- we talk to everyone except the person we have an issue with! Of course it's easy to talk to someone who isn't involved - there's no risk or confrontation in that. But it is peacebreaking, not peacemaking. It takes courage to call someone and say, "can we talk?"
- d. **Be careful about what you say and how you say it** - there are words and tones that promote peace, and there are words and tones that pour gas on the fire. I was trying to burn a stump in our yard a couple weeks ago and at one point the fire was going out, and so I decided to carefully pour a little gasoline from the gas can onto the fire, intending to relight it. As I poured it, everything seemed to be going well until all of a sudden it burst into flames, singeing my arm and lighting the pour spout of the gas can on fire. So I jump back and I'm holding a gas can that has flames burning at the spout. I waved it in the air a couple times and thankfully it went out, but it could have been a disaster.

We can think a few words won't be a problem and all of a sudden have a raging fire on our hands. Can I give a very specific example? Social media. Be careful what you write on facebook or other forms of social media. We are in a very emotionally charged environment with the elections and a lot of good, sincere people disagree on how they see it. That's ok, disagreement can be a healthy thing. But sometimes I see people using inflammatory and demeaning words and that isn't going to promote peace, it's going to break peace. Listen, if someone wants to reject me over Jesus, and I am trying to be as loving and respectful witness I can be, I can live with that. But I don't want to break relationship or damage friendships over voting for Trump or Hillary. Jesus didn't call me to be a witness for a particular party, but for a kingdom. The kingdom of God. That doesn't mean we can't have our opinions or state them. But be careful and responsible especially when using social media. You represent Christ. Make sure your words represent him well.

If you're writing that post or email with your heart pounding from the emotion of what you want to say, it's probably better to sit on it for 24 hours. Words can be powerful things - for good or for evil. Jesus calls us to speak in such a way that we promote peace between brothers and sisters, and peace with those who don't know Christ, except when a loving and bold witness breaks the peace.

- e. **Walk in the Holy Spirit** - let's end where we began. Jesus never intended for us to walk this all out in our own strength and we will fail if we try. The Holy Spirit can empower us to be different people. To talk and think and act differently. Let's ask for the Spirit of God to pour out His power and presence on us that we might walk as peacemakers in a world of strife and broken relationships. And if you're thinking of a broken relationship right now, ask the Lord if there's a way for you to promote peace in it. Sometimes there isn't a way - it doesn't all depend on you. But have you spoken with careful words and from a humble heart? Or have you poured gas on the fire? Lay that relationship before the Lord and ask Him what He would have you do.