

Blessed are the Pure in Heart, for They Shall See God

Matthew 5:8

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“Blessed are the ‘pure in heart’, for they shall see God.”

I walked through Safeway on my lunch hour a couple of weeks ago, and found all kinds of **food** claiming to be pure, and thought I might understand what ‘pure’ means by reading the labels about pure products:

1. This is 100% Pure Maple Syrup that promises exquisite taste. Perhaps a pure disciple is also exquisite -- exceptional and to be sought out.
2. Here’s an empty bottle of “Pure Pressed” Apple Juice. I’m not sure if the apple juice was pure, or the pressing is pure, and no lumpy bits of apple in the drink. It must have been good, because someone at home drank it before I got to try it. Maybe pure pressed means that Jesus doesn’t want lumpy disciples, but wants our rough spots smoothed over.
3. Pure & Natural Green Tea promises to be the “world’s finest tea experience”. Maybe a pure heart has something to do with being world class, the best of the best.
4. 100% Pure Canola Oil is free of cholesterol and transfat. No corn oil in this pure bottle of canola, nor olive oil or crude oil...just 100% canola (whatever that is).
5. 100% Pure Sesame Seed Oil – no canola in this one either.
6. This is called ‘Pure Water’ and it says it’s ‘the perfect taste every time’. I thought water was supposed to have ‘no’ taste. I’m sure it’s good water for those on a diet since the label says it’s “calorie free”. The purification process for this water is described as ‘rigorous’ – a 7 step process to remove the unwanted substances that other bottled water leaves in. Perhaps pure disciples need to undergo 7 rigorous steps as well; I think that’s a biblical number.
7. These two have something in common: This Pure Baking Soda is the #1 trusted brand. This Pure Peppermint Extract has “The Taste You Trust”. Maybe a disciple with a pure heart is someone we can trust.
8. And finally, I found this Pure Cane Sugar – no artificial sweetener here, only the real stuff, nothing hypocritical about the calories here. Maybe a pure disciple is similar – we want the real thing – no hypocrites.

And then there were these **personal hygiene** products I found:

1. 100% Pure Cotton Swabs – no synthetic fibers, or scratchy wool for sensitive ears. I'd like less scratchy disciples, too.
2. This 'Pure & Caring' Dish Liquid is made by Palmolive. It's free of heavy fragrance, phosphates, and there are no unnecessary chemicals. Just the caring chemicals. Caring seems like a good idea for disciples, too.
3. This Sunscreen Lotion that provides 'pure and simple' sun protection – What's pure protection? It means it's fragrance free. No chemicals or smells to give me a rash or attract mosquitoes. Maybe pure disciples don't cause hives or attract bad bugs either.
4. Finally, I found this Baby Powder with Pure Cornstarch. I'm not quite sure what 'pure cornstarch' means since the ingredients include aloe and vitamin E in this 'pure' cornstarch. There was lots of stuff for babies that claimed to be pure (or natural). Not sure what this means for disciples, but maybe we should stay in the baby section of the store so we stay pure like children.

Enough from the grocery store. My shopping trip caused me to conclude that a 'pure' product is free of horrible ingredients that I don't want, and I should look for the true, natural, authentic, and trustworthy products.

Purity in the gospel of Matthew is a translation of the Greek word, *kathoros*, meaning 'to be clean, pure, or clear'. *Kathoros* describes a godly person like these products do: one who is free of undesirable qualities, contaminants or impurities. Striving for cleanness was central to religious practice in Jesus' day. The priests taught that human beings became unclean in at least four types of situations: (1) when they came into contact with the dead, (2) when they touched or spilled bodily fluids (such as blood, semen, spit, tears, or the amniotic fluid of birth), (3) when they ate food that was defined as bad, and (4) when they contracted a disease such as leprosy. Being unclean or impure was considered offensive to God, and cut a person off from 'seeing' God.¹ Thus, the beatitude: The *pure* in heart will see God, the *unclean* of heart will not see God. A large part of the priest's job was to teach the law about what was clean and what was not, and then to explain the rituals to get clean again so one could stay in a close relationship with God. These purity laws were meant to safeguard the group – to keep the community safe from harmful diseases. Purity laws also served to keep Jews from being absorbed into the more powerful, majority cultures that threatened their very existence. For example, the pig was part of Canaanite cuisine, and so became 'unclean' to the Jews so they remained distinct from those Canaanite people. During the exile, the food of all Gentile nations became unclean.

Today's beatitude is shocking because it challenges the *usual* understanding of purity in Jewish tradition. From this beatitude, and other actions and teachings of Jesus, we know that Jesus was not concerned about bodily fluids when assessing one's relationship with God. The clean in heart will see God, not those who are 'stained' by blood, spit and tears. Remember when Mary washed Jesus with her *tears*? or when Jesus restored a blind man's sight with a paste of dirt and *spit*? Jesus did not consider himself unclean by Mary's touch and her tears. And he demonstrated and taught that healing is possible from what was thought to be unclean. Unclean *spit* restored a man's sight. An unclean *Samaritan* helped heal a man who was beaten by robbers.

Note that Jesus does not challenge the *categories* of pure and impure, but he argued for, and practiced living, a new definition of what it meant to be clean and pure. He focuses not on the externals of bodily fluids, diet, or one's age, gender or ethnic background; but on the heart – a moral kind of purity. His stress on morality isn't entirely new with Jesus, though. His teachings are rooted in the prophets who preached that what God prefers is not *ritualistic* and *physical* purity, but *moral* purity: a life of love and justice, and caring for the poor and strangers in our midst. Psalm 24 expresses God's desire for 'clean hands and a pure heart' (vs. 4). The kind of purity that Jesus affirms is a purity of heart: ethical action, commitment and integrity; giving God honor in all one does, being single-minded in devotion to God. A 'pure heart' is the quality that led Peter and Andrew, and James and John, to put down their fishing nets and follow Jesus. They left behind the security of family and profession.

And so, 'purity of heart' is the passion to seek God above all else. Benedictine Sister Joan Chittister calls 'purity of heart' the 'fuel of commitment – it's what gets us up in the morning and sends us to bed dead-tired at night – but smiling.'² Purity is something we all need, for without it, life is lackluster, without appetite, and lacking direction. Life is dull and meaningless. There is nothing we want badly enough, or care enough about, to concentrate our energies on it. We're bored, apathetic, listless, and God seems very far away.³

Demonstrating such devotion, giving 100% to one's values and goals will get a mixed response in our culture: Sometimes such single-minded drive is admired and rewarded: Star athletes who practice hard, and who follow a disciplined diet to help their bodies perform well, and who

focus their thoughts to visualize getting the goal, or crossing the line, or hitting the ball over the fence – such purity and passion is admirable, and rewarded. There are Husky, Mariners, Sounders, Cougar and Seahawks fans in this church that not only applaud the drive and passion it takes to win: they pay big bucks to attend the games. How much does a ticket cost to see a Seahawks game or Husky game? (Isaac and I each paid \$67 two months ago for the last few tickets to yesterday’s Sounders game. Plus, \$20 for the scarf to show our appreciation to the team.) Something similar happens with musicians: We applaud Jeff or Tillie (or others) when their discipline and drive is evident in a song well played (though regrettably they don’t get the big bucks of disciplined athletes).

Pure passion is not always admired, though. When someone else’s values and goals in life make us uncomfortable, the ‘purity’ of their practice is not applauded, but denigrated. Their commitment is called naïve, silly, dumb, dangerous, too costly, not grounded in reality, or irresponsible. **Parents of college students** are uncomfortable when their children choose art or theatre majors, and tell their children that those passions are not responsible or smart. A **vegan** is downright silly for it’s normal to kill and enslave animals in our culture. A passion that makes most of us uncomfortable, no matter which ‘side’ of the debate we choose, is the struggle of gays and lesbians for equal rights. I heard **Lt. Daniel Chai** speak to a packed audience at the UPS campus last fall.⁴ Lt. Chai is a West Point graduate, Iraq War Veteran, and fluent Arabic linguist who was dishonorably discharged from the Army for his decision to *come* out, and then *speak* out against the military’s ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ policy. As part of his story, he was told by many, including some of his family and gay colleagues – “Just stay quiet. You’re a West Point graduate, the elite and best-trained of the armed forces. You’ll lose too much taking this on. It’s not time yet.” The source of his passion was fascinating. He said that it was the military itself that made him a gay activist. While at West Point, the values of honor, integrity, and *truth*-telling were drilled into him. He would see posters in the halls of school and at military posts where he served, posters that promoted the Army’s core creed: “No solder left alone.” Too many gay and lesbian soldiers he knew in the Army felt terribly alone, driving the suicide rate high in that profession because not enough were silly enough, or naïve enough, to take on a policy that left others feeling desperately alone. **Dorothy Height**, the matriarch of

the civil rights movement, died this year at age 98. She was the president of the National Council of Negro Women for 40 years. With others, she walked for miles on feeble legs rather than stand on busses where only white people could sit. “When people told her the time was not ripe for a given thing, she would challenge them to ‘ripen the time.’⁵ *You ripen the time.*

Single-minded devotion to a cause – purity of heart – was not always popular in Jesus’ day either. And Jesus knew it. He knew that his disciples needed a blessing – not to be *chastised* because of their convictions, but to be *comforted* for the purity of their commitment to God.

Joan Chittister reminds us that what drives us can sometimes be a bad and hurtful thing, but at least having motivation in life is clear and compelling, giving us a reason to live each day. To be driven by nothing, is a different kind of problem – usually just as bad, or sad, or harmful -- for those driven by nothing don’t care to get involved; they don’t bother to make a difference; they are depressed about their life; they drain the good will of those around them; they don’t reach out and lend a hand or speak a word of love; and they fail to become who God made them to be.⁶ Jesus condemns the servant who hides his talent, doing nothing with what he has (Mt. 25:24-30). In Revelation, John teaches that lukewarm Christians will be ‘spit out’ of God’s mouth, as God is disgusted with their lack of passion (Rev. 3:16).

Chittister goes on to explain the beatitude in this way: Most people, she says, are driven by something, the question is *what*. Are we driven by work? by family? by the pursuit of happiness? by the love of leisure? by money? by the need for affirmation? Those who are pure in heart are driven by the ultimates in life: driven by God, love, justice, mercy, and those fruits of the Spirit that the Apostle Paul identifies as peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control.⁷ And so the questions this beatitude raises for me: What *drives* me? What drives *you*? What drives *the ministry of this church*? What drives *the leaders of our country*?

Jesus and the disciples were criticized because of what drove them, criticized because of their ‘purity of heart’, their commitment to leave behind their own families in the call to make disciples of all nations -- to invite anyone and everyone into the band of believers. Jesus and his followers were criticized because they re-defined what it meant to be pure. The priests criticized them for eating and drinking with people who made them impure. Remember the

miraculous feeding of the 5,000 with some boy's lunch of 2 fish and 5 loaves of bread? It wasn't the power of Jesus to multiply bread that made the religious leaders so angry: It was their practice of purity that was threatened: Who knew where the food came from? How was it prepared? And who was gathered to share it? It was unclean, and not a pure thing to do.

Jesus *redefined* purity, not dismissed the need for it. He believed that what's inside a person is what matters in life. What mattered is what came out of his mouth, not what he put in it. It didn't matter to Jesus with whom he ate, or with whom he spent time. His purity and relationship with God was not determined by whom he was with, but how he treated those he was with.⁸ His purity had nothing to do with them, but what was going on in his own heart.

Jesus' blessing today is for those who could not possibly get right with God under the purity practice and beliefs of the day. Jesus blessed those whose life on the 'outside' appeared all wrong: their bodies were broken, or they were born the wrong gender, or born in the wrong family, or they weren't old enough to matter, or they had a disease they couldn't help, or they were born on the wrong side of the river, or they recently gave birth and were unclean in God's sight for 7 days if her baby was a boy, or 14 days if her baby was a girl.⁹ Jesus blesses those whose *hearts* were pure when their *bodies* could not be. It is the pure in heart that will see God. By assuring them that they will see God, Jesus' gives his disciples the status of family – the blessing of brothers and sisters -- when the religious tradition meant they were on their own, and not welcome.

You are welcome here when your *heart* is pure, and you give your all to God. You are not crazy, you are not misguided, or misinformed. *Blessed are you who are pure in heart, for you will see God.* No matter what others say about your commitment, and the integrity of your call to follow, you have a special place in God's sight. Goodness, just going to church on Sunday morning is a worthless, silly commitment these days. It's crazy to come here when you could be sleeping in, or enjoying a latte with a friend, or doing whatever chores you can't get done during the work week. It's especially senseless to hang out in church with people who argue and fight over trivial things, or with the imperfect people who sometimes make mistakes in what they think and say and do. Blessed are *you* for your purity of heart, your devotion to God – no matter what others think about your *being* here, or about your *staying* here.

In this beatitude blessing, Jesus is not trying to get others to change, to convert them to his way, but simply offering comfort and hope to those who are driven by God's spirit to live a pure life: a life of integrity, honoring God by their heart-felt decisions and actions.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. In other words, 'Blessed are those who spend their lives looking for God.' We can't possibly see that which we have no intention of finding in the first place. (It's why Jackie Gleason said that the second day of a diet is always easier than the first. By the second day, you're off it!)

In her book on healing, Rev. Susan Vogel speaks of how hard it is for people to return to health after an injury, and how hard it was for her to recover from her own heartache when her 23-year-old son was killed in a car accident. She reflects on the question that Jesus asked a man who was lame for 38 years: "Do you want to be made well?" (John 5:6). Susan thought that was a silly question. Of course he would want to be well! But, if wellness and getting through the tragedies in life takes any kind of work or commitment – it's easy to understand why a person might say "No" to Jesus.¹⁰ After her son's death, Susan knew that it took a lot of courage to be well, to live well, and to do the hard work of grieving and forgiveness, or the hard work of therapy and rehabilitation, or the hard work of 12 steps to recovery, or simply the hard work to eat or exercise in a consistently good way.

This beatitude goes to the heart of what it means to live well. For those with a pure heart, for those who are committed and have the courage to follow the ways of God, you will see God not just in the life to come, but now. You will go to bed tired – but smiling. No matter how hard life can be, when your life is pure and you keep on keepin' on, you will see God." It's not as lonely or frightening as you think. God is with you when the journey is hard. You are not the only one who's walked the path you are on. There is another at your side (hold up communion bread [8:15 service] or point to cross [10:15 service]).

¹ The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Vol. 1, pp. 641-648.

² Joan Chittister, Seeing with Our Souls: Monastic Wisdom for Every Day (Sheed & Ward, Lanham, Maryland, 2002), p. 96.

³ Chittister, pp. 95-96.

⁴ Lt. Choi's (pronounced "CHAY") lecture was at Marshall Hall at the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma, Washington, sponsored by ASUPS (Associated Students of UPS), Nov. 10, 2009. His father was a Southern Baptist minister, and his mother was a maternity ward nurse (who wanted lots of grandbabies).

⁵ Her story is reported in Leonard Pitts, Jr. syndicated column on Sunday, April 25, 2010 (printed in The News Tribune, page B6).

⁶ Chittister, p. 98.

⁷ Chittister, p. 99.

⁸ I am indebted to Sarah Dylan Breuer's blog, SarahLaughed.net. (See http://www.sarahlaughed.net/lectionary/2005/01/fourth_sunday_a.html) Here, she discusses the similarities and differences in the notion of purity between Jesus and the Pharisees. Dylan Breuer earned her M.Phil. in biblical studies from the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, a C.Phil. in early church history from the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), and studied at the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Her lectionary blog was named among "The Best Spiritual Blogs on the Internet" by Beliefnet.com and her writings have appeared in The Witness (for which she also served as editor) and The Christian Century.

⁹ Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible on days of being unclean following birth, p. 644.

¹⁰ See Chapter 2 of Susan Vogel's What About Divine Healing? A Study of Christian Healing (Abingdon Press, Nashville, Tennessee, 2004). She discusses how difficult, overwhelming and hard it can be to be and stay well when we are weary, tired, do not have the help we need, or have too many responsibilities and others are accustomed to how we are now.