

The Pure in Heart: Part One

Essay 7 in the series “The Beatitudes”

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

With this, the sixth beatitude as recorded in Matthew 5:8 we come to the ultimate spiritual quest – to see God, if not in a literal sense, to experience God, to encounter the presence of God. Now there is a sense in which this can only fully be realized in heaven. And there is a sense in which, in the words of the apostle John later in 1 John 4:12, “no one has ever seen God.” After all, how could we expect to see in a visible, physical way the God in whom we live and move and have our being? How could we expect to see the God in whom we are? And yet the annals of spiritual history are filled with people who have experienced God, encountered the presence of God, sensed the divine flow all around them and sometimes within them, and perceived the whole range of life as being open to the Spirit of the living God.

And in this sixth beatitude Jesus tell us how: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” It comes down, he says, to purity in heart. I would suppose that most of us when we think of purity in heart think of someone whose mind is sexually clean, who isn’t looking at all the wrong things and thinking all the wrong things, who isn’t plagued by impure thoughts. And in an age as sexualized as ours, that might be all we think. But on further reflection it might occur to us that there is also the matter of hearts that are dishonest, deceitful, hypocritical, and in this sense surely not pure.

For all that though, purity of heart is still something more, more a matter of focus, of single-mindedness. The Greek word for *pure* is *katharos* meaning clean, pure or unmixed. It suggests that which is uncomplicated, simplified or undistracted, so that the great nineteenth-century Danish philosopher Kierkegaard was right when he titled one of his books *Purity of Heart Is To Will One Thing*. It’s a matter of loving the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength in the words of the great Sh’ma of Deuteronomy 6:4. Or later in this same Sermon on the Mount, it’s a matter of not serving two masters, of not serving both God and Money, of storing up for yourself treasures in heaven not treasures on earth, “for where your treasure is there will your heart be also”(all this in Matthew 6:19-24). It’s a matter of seeking first God’s kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things (that otherwise would preoccupy you) will be given to you as well (Matthew 6:33). And the way to do this is simply described as not worrying about tomorrow. So live in the present. Live in the now. Live in God.

I am reminded of a scene in the dude-ranch movie *City Slickers*, still a Netflix reliable, when the gruff old cowboy Curly (Jack Palance) asks the city slicker Mitch (Billy Crystal) if he knows the meaning of life.

– “Nope.”

- “It’s this,” and Curly holds up one finger.
- “Your finger?” Mitch asks in vintage Billy Crystal smart mouth.
- “No, just one thing. The meaning of life is just one thing, and when you find it, all the rest don’t mean nothing.”

Jesus is saying something very close to this. He’s saying that only those with undistracted hearts will see God. It’s a matter of calming the heart, focusing the heart, centering the heart, transcending the ego, our preoccupation with the narrow and fearful concerns of the self, not being tossed to and fro by every whim of ego, attracted to, drawn to, seduced by this, repelled by that, worried about this, not being thrown off by all the things we like and dislike, overcoming our restless passions and desires and all the unstable emotions they arouse.

It’s a matter of seeing past the surface of life to the all-pervading Spirit of the living God. It’s what Brother Lawrence discovered when he was working in the Carmelite kitchens in seventeenth-century Paris and devoted his life to living every moment in “the presence of God.” It’s what Jeremiah speaking for God wrote in the darkest hours of Judah’s history in Jeremiah 29:13: “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.” Well, actually what he says is this, and this is beautiful, “For I know the plans I have for you [even in the bleakest of times, when times could not possibly have been worse], plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart, with all your will, with all your energy. I will be found by you!”

It’s what Jesus meant in John 17:3: “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God.” It’s a point that’s made over and over again in the Gospel of John. Eternal life is a present reality. Eternal life, this quality of the age to come, timeless life (that captures it, sort of!), life that circumstance and death cannot destroy, happens now. Right here, right now. So Jesus would say in John 5:24, “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.” It’s ours now, or it could be if we would just stop and look and see, if we would break into our preoccupations with ourselves and know God. It’s ours now, this life filled with expectancy, a sure, settled conviction that good will happen, this life surrounded by grace, animated by trust, this transcendent life, increasingly conscious of God within us and all around us, as close as the air we breathe, no, even closer, inside us, this joyful life, often euphoric, inseparable from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.

God is not far from each one of us.

– Dale Pauls