

## Simplicity (Part One)

### *Blessed are the pure in heart*

Reflection 12 in the series “The Last Great New Command”

Even we who are Christian still struggle to love. I say “even we who are Christian” because on nothing was Jesus more emphatic than this – that his followers should love one another. But we struggle partly because the historic church has way too seldom really taken the way to love, has never seen its primary mission being to learn the way to love and teach it to others, but partly for other reasons as well. Like – we don’t have time to love. We don’t have time in our lives to love. We don’t have space in our lives to love. We don’t have space in our minds to love. We’re far too often distracted, anxious and fearful. We’re too attached to things to love people. We’re too attached to our notions of how our houses or lives or communities or schools or government should look to love people. Perhaps politics is to us more important than love. Or maybe something else is.

It was exactly this that Jesus addressed in our text this morning, Matthew 5:8, when he taught his followers, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” The Greek word for *pure* suggests that which is uncomplicated, simplified or undistracted, so that Kierkegaard is right when he titles one of his books *Purity of Heart Is To Will One Thing*.

I think again of one of my favorite movie scenes, one in the movie *City Slickers* when the gruff old cowboy Curly (played by Jack Palance) asks the city slicker Mitch (played by 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 swept up in the over-heated rhetoric of our time, 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!"

So Jesus is saying that only those with undistracted hearts will see God. But in developing this point, he goes on to say later in the Sermon on the Mount that you cannot serve both God and Money (Matthew 6:24). Almost no one believes that, but Jesus did. His favorite advice for all kinds of spiritual problems is "Go, sell what you have and give to the poor."

American culture aims at the very opposite of this. In the 1987 movie *Wall Street* the character Gordon Gecko played with reptilian cool by Michael Douglas made famous the line, "Greed is good." In fact, he said, "Greed is good! Greed is right! Greed works! Greed will save the U.S.A!" Well, that was thirty years ago; we're beginning to see what greed really is doing to our country. I drive by houses in our area. And I wonder how many people live in these palaces. The truth is, I don't know. But sometimes I try to figure it out. Husband. Wife. Two children. But a blended family. So on weekends maybe two more. Nanny. Full-time maid. But often there's still a whole wing of the house I can't account for. Maybe weekend guests. So we own more and more physical space, and have less and less spiritual space. We have more and more living space in our lives, and fewer and fewer people in our lives to put in it.

The apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 lists kinds of people who will not inherit the kingdom of God. And we're familiar with two or three of these categories, But we often miss that greedy is one of them, that the greedy will not inherit the kingdom of God. And this is true not because God wants us all in modest cookie-cutter housing but because he knows certain kinds of preoccupations will keep us from ever really seeing God and, therefore, from ever finding the way to love, which is what the kingdom of God is all about.

In Luke 12:13-21 Jesus tell a story. The grounds of a certain rich man produced a good crop. So he thought to himself, "What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops. Ah! This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink, and be merry.'" This rich man can only see his life here; he cannot see God. So God breaks up his talking to himself with, "You fool, this very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?"

The story's over. I suppose it's how many American stories end. We live in a rich fool society. We live in a rich fool society when any night its life may be demanded from it. The rich have a lot of problems, don't they?

– Dale Pauls

*Part Two (of two) next week*