

One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple. Psalm 27:4

Jesus fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet **not as I will, but as you will.**" Matthew 26:39

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Matthew 5:8

Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; **without holiness no one will see the Lord.** Hebrews 12:14

Blessed are the Pure in Heart....

In 1984, at the ripe old age of 30, and after serving six years as "interim" pastors at a church in a small Kansas town, Pam and I discerned that the Lord was leading us to do something entirely different with our life together than what we had planned. We finished out the church year in June, then sold our car and most of our belongings and spent six months on an unemployed sabbatical while preparing to work for three years in refugee camps in Africa. We knew we were headed into a war zone, so we felt a strong need to spend some quality time with our parents and siblings before we left (just in case the rebels or the big snakes got us before we could return).

To get around during those six months, and to haul our remaining belongings to places they could be stored, we bought a small used pickup. A few weeks before we were to leave the US, we spent Thanksgiving in Idaho with Pam's family. After lots of goodbyes, we packed the little truck and headed down the interstate for the 1200-mile winter drive back to Kansas to celebrate Christmas with my family. About halfway through that trip, somewhere in the middle of nowhere in the frigid mountains of Wyoming, the pickup's fuel line froze up and the engine died as we cruised down the highway at 70 mph. **God clearly was watching over us**, because we were within a mile or two of an interstate exit with a service station at the bottom of the ramp. I managed to restart the engine and regain some speed a couple of times before it would die again and leave us coasting. We rolled down the exit ramp and into the service station driveway on gravity power, not internal combustion. After a couple of cans of fuel line deicer and a few cups of coffee (we drank those), the engine started and ran like it should, and we made it the rest of the way to Kansas without a recurrence.

We never did figure out whether moisture had condensed and collected over time in the pickup's fuel tank, or if we had been sold some tainted gasoline earlier on that trip. Either way, it has ever since been a vivid reminder to me of the importance of allowing only gasoline, not a combination of fuel and water (or anything else), into an engine designed to run on pure gasoline. For several tanks of fuel after that incident, I added a can of deicer to try to eliminate any moisture that might still be there. The experience also became an analogy that often comes to mind when I think about the sixth Beatitude Jesus spoke in Matthew 5, "**blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God**" (5:8). Just as having something other than pure gasoline in that pickup engine threatened to keep us from seeing our Kansas family and friends, allowing anything other than God's will into the "engine" of our spiritual lives makes it difficult if not impossible to "see" God or maintain a right relationship with him.

The Stairway to Spiritual Life It is useful to see this sixth Beatitude in the context and order of the previous five. As noted in earlier devotionals, Clarence Jordan wrote in *Sermon on the Mount* that each Beatitude is a step in the ascent to spiritual life which rests primarily upon the ever-deepening foundation of the steps already climbed. We first awaken to sin's persistent danger and **admit our need for God's rescue**. We acknowledge the damage sin has done to God's intentions for our life and everything around us, and **we mourn** and experience the Lord's comforting forgiveness. God shows us that only he has the power and wisdom to reshape our life in his image and moves us **in meekness to surrender that work to him**. We are given a taste of the Bread of Life and the Living Water which instills in us **a hunger and thirst for a steady diet of that soul nourishment**. The satisfaction that provides moves us to get involved in Christ's redemptive work in the world. He teaches us that his work must be done in his **Way of mercy** in which he commutes the penalty for sin prescribed in the Law, but then goes beyond that forgiveness. By his Spirit, Christ helps to lift us out of the enemy's entrapment, then accompanies and strengthens us to prevent our falling back into it. Learning to treat others with his mercy keeps us aware of Christ's constant stream of mercy flowing into our own lives. That consistent experience in turn convinces us that Jesus' Way is always the best way, indeed the only way that leads to God's loving, eternal outcomes. As we begin following his Way in all our choices and actions, **we find his will supplanting and becoming our own will because we see clearly that his is infinitely and eternally superior to ours**. **Our hearts are being purified** from all lesser desires that are incompatible with God's presence, nature, and intentions.

Blessed are the Pure in Heart Biblical passages like this Beatitude consider the "heart" to be more than the physical organ pumping life-giving blood to the rest of the body. People in Jesus' day understood the heart to be essential for physical life, but they also thought of it as the seat of people's will -- their desires, emotions, priorities,

affections, and decisions. It was essential for obeying the greatest commandment, to “love God with all the heart, soul, mind, and strength.”

Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing The 19th century Danish philosopher/theologian Soren Kierkegaard wrote a book with that title which quite simply defines the sixth Beatitude. He almost certainly understood purity to be “singleness,” as used in the King James Version of Matthew 6:22. Jesus said there that if one’s eye is single, his whole body will be filled with light, but if the eye is not single, the body will be full of darkness. In talking with cataract patients, I’ve heard some speak of seeing a double image and not knowing which one to respond to. Kierkegaard had learned the truth of what Jesus said next (Matthew 6:24), that no one can serve two masters. He wrote that the world’s delusion was to seek satisfaction by possessing many things and serving many masters. The discipleship which Jesus blessed arose from hearts which had surrendered self-will and had echoed his prayer in Gethsemane, “not my will, but Thine be done” (Matthew 26:39).

Many people, when hearing “purity of heart,” think mostly of avoiding indecent or obscene literature, movies, behaviors, and thoughts. Others might also include various kinds of harmful selfishness, habits, choices, and desires which clearly offend rather than glorify the Lord. The purity of heart which Jesus blessed certainly includes refraining from such things, but it goes even deeper than that. The truth is that even good created things, when allowed to take charge of our lives or determine our spiritual faithfulness, become impurities that divert our focus and prevent us from seeing God. In our pickup’s fuel illustration, the liquid going to the engine was not “single” or pure gasoline, but also contained water which harmed the engine’s function. Water is a good and precious gift from God, essential for life, but it must be used as it was created to be used.

In Sermon on the Mount, Clarence Jordan wrote that the purity of heart Jesus blesses requires a complete break with sin and “a dethroning of all lesser gods.” He also noted that it means having the same Lord of both our inner and outer lives, unlike the Pharisees whom Jesus called “whitewashed tombs” (Matthew 23:27,28) due to their exterior piety but inward sinful selfishness. In Jordan’s view, purity of heart is “an all or nothing, no middle ground” commitment that enables disciples to see God now, not just in a future eternity.

They Will See God When we choose to surrender our self-will and follow the single will of God, the obstacles, enticements, and filters of the world are removed from our spiritual eyes. Like the blind people Jesus healed during his time on earth, we begin seeing things we have been walking right past without realizing they were there. With Elisha’s frightened servant (II Kings 6), we are enabled to **see the Lord’s protective presence** with us in challenging situations where we’ve felt alone. We discover as Saul of Tarsus did on his way to Damascus (Acts 9) that the Lord has been pursuing us for **meaningful lives of ministry**, if only we will pay attention and obey. When we reflect upon our past with those redeemed eyes, we realize that the Spirit of Christ has **guided us away from dangers and disasters** of which we weren’t even aware, and he has **led us into life-giving relationships and opportunities** we would never have seen on our own. It is this step in the Beatitudes ascension into spiritual life which teaches and helps us **to see, in good Quaker fashion, “that of God in every person”** (or that of God at work with every person), even those we may not like or may find adversarial. We will experience new and **deeper appreciation for the evidence of God’s omnipresence** in the beauty of his handiwork in all of the creation, in the spectacular and the commonplace, the vast and the minute. With Mary after she encountered the risen Jesus, we all should be able to say “I have seen the Lord!”

It’s a Gift and a Result, Not an Achievement Some people think that a pure heart is gained by gritting their teeth and trying harder to resist sin. Our disciplined effort and cooperation with the Spirit certainly is required, but that’s very much like saying repeatedly, “I will not think about a pink elephant,” and it ends up being all you can think about. In my own spiritual life (and in others I know about), this step of **heart purity results primarily from my disciplined practice of and growth in the first five Beatitudes**. Admitting my need for God, mourning sin’s damage, surrendering my rights to God, being driven by hunger and thirst for his rightness, and working for his kingdom from a basis of mercy like that which I receive from him – all that fills me with such love for the Lord and life in his Spirit that it crowds out all the competing loves. **My heart becomes single as a result of that ongoing journey**. I no longer need to waste energy deciding whose will to heed each time new things arise. My effort is expended instead on discerning exactly what God’s will is, and what his will requires of me in that situation.

In Following the Call, Brennan Manning wrote that “holiness is not a personal achievement.” Rather, purity of heart is the empty space created when we allow Christ to sweep all the self-will and selfishness out of our lives, and then invite him to fill it with his presence and love. The promise of his Beatitude is that if we’ll let the Lord do that, we will begin to see God in ways we haven’t seen before, ways that will lift our spirits in joy and will deepen and enrich our personal lives and our life together in his Church. He welcomes every one of us to join that journey. We should accept.

--Ron Ferguson, 3 March 2024

Queries for Worship-Sharing and Reflection

- 1) How do you define purity of heart? How do you define holiness? How are they different? How are they the same?
- 2) What “good” created things have you seen become impurities/obstacles which harm people’s spiritual lives?

- 3) In your experience and observation, what is the correlation between disciplined spiritual growth and seeing God?
- 4) What are your favorite or most moving ways of seeing God in this life, even before eternity?