**Beatitudes 6  
Pure-hearted and blessed**

Will Fitzgerald

Kalamazoo Mennonite Fellowship

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Matthew 5:1-12, Luke 6:20-26

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

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We are trying to learn these sayings together:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.

Blessed are they that mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

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

With my sermon this morning, I’m going to paint myself into a corner, and I won’t know how to get myself out. When I finish, I hope you’ll help me.

What if I told you … what if I told you I had ten simple rules that, if you followed them, would guarantee you’d be good enough. Good enough for anything, even to see God? Well, I have them here, and I’d like to share them with you.

First, you just need to have nothing else you’d treat as more important than God, to acknowledge God as *your* God. The second one is pretty easy: you have to promise to not to make any pictures or statues of God. Third, you have to promise not to misuse God’s name. Fourth, you need to devote one day in seven as a holy Sabbath day. Fifth, you need to treat your parents well. Sixth, don’t kill or murder anyone. Seventh, don’t have sex outside marriage. Eighth, don’t steal anything. Ninth, don’t lie about other people. Ten, don’t envy other people’s wealth, and wish it were yours.

Pretty simple right? But really, I’m not being sarcastic. Most of us would agree with most of these things, and the price of admission is pretty low for such a payoff.

Still, almost immediately, I think we being to wonder about whether we’d really did the right thing. Can I watch a movie on Sunday? If my parents are mean slimeballs, how do I respect them? Can I kill someone if the government says I can? Can I lie if my life is in danger? And that sex is actually pretty complicated …

So, maybe, we could just make *rules about the rules*, and just decide ahead of time what counts as breaking the rules and what counts as keeping the rules. Maybe we’d make a big list of what counts as working on that special Sabbath day: starting a fire is work, so you can’t strike a match, or turn on a stove, except if the stove is already on, you can turn the heat up a little, but not too much… And, of course, there is going to be disagreement about who gets to decide, so we will need *rules about rules about rules*. And this is going to take over our lives. And for some people, this is going to be really great, even life-giving. But you can see that this is going to start separating people into camps, the good people, the pure people on the one hand, and the bad people, the impure people on the other. Factions will spring up, and many will be just physically or logistically unable to do much in the way of keeping these laws mean to purify us before God. Not surprisingly, these people will be disproportionately female, or poor, or other.

So, it is kind of surprising to me that Jesus says, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” After all, Jesus will go on to break these laws of purity, especially the “don’t work on the Sabbath” rule. He will work to make food on the Sabbath, and he will especially, time and time again, heal people on the Sabbath. In this very sermon, he will set the bar for keeping the commandments impossibly high. Adultery is not just sleeping with another person, but lusting after others. Divorce is outlawed. Being angry with someone is the same as murder (don’t tell Jesus about how angry I was at the Adobe corporation the other day).

We have been contrasting the blessings in the beatitudes with the list of woes found in Luke. This one does not have a parallel in Luke, but there *are* seven woes pronounced in this very gospel against the teachers of the law and the Pharisees, who were trying very hard to live a life of purity, but making proselytes, taking oaths in just the right way, tithing in just the right way, paying attention to what and how they ate in just the right way. Rather than saying they were on their way to seeing God, Jesus calls them serpents and vipers who were unlikely to escape hell. (Mt 23:13-33).

How will we solve this riddle?

Jesus, remember, is pronouncing blessings one people. In fact, he’s pronouncing blessings on people who are just those who seem unlikely to meet the purity standards: the poor and the meek, those whose mourning might take them to places of distress and impurity, those who wish to extend mercy to others.

What comes out of the heart is what defiles us, Jesus says. “For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander.These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.” (Matthew 15:19,20). It’s not what we eat or how we eat it; it’s not following the letter of the law that makes us good or makes us bad. Those rules upon rules are like a guide who’s way more likely to let us fall into a deep pit than help us out.

What we need, I believe Jesus is saying, is a *change of heart*, not a *change of behavior*. But this pure heart, in order to see God, must exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.

This is the corner I feel painted in: it doesn’t seem like a *blessing* if, in order to see God, I have to have a pure heart.

Can you help me get out of it?

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Here’s a tentative escape out of the corner.

I have been misreading the overall intent of the Beatitudes. I was so enamored of the first beatitudes, which are blessings of welcome. Jesus looks over the crowd, and sees people who are poor, who are in mourning, who are meek, and he welcomes them as they are, and promises blessings to them: the kingdom, comfort, the earth itself.

And I read the fourth beatitude that way as well, and I don’t think I am wrong. Jesus knows that people in the crowd are hungering and thirsting to be good and to find justice, and Jesus promises a blessing to them, too: they will be fulfilled.

But I think this beatitude is also a pivot, or hinge. The fulfilment of our hunger and thirst for righteousness is that God will change and make us people who can act justly and well. The next three beatitudes, I now believe, flesh this out.

As I said last week, Jesus promises mercy for the merciful; forgiveness of sins for those who forgive others. This is a general spiritual law. But being merciful is more something we do than something we are: a choice more than a state. It is one way of being and becoming righteous. And Jesus promises to fulfill our desires to be merciful; and mercy follows.

And so also, here: we desire to “see God.” Now, it’s likely Jesus is talking both about the by and by and the here and now. What kind of person sees God’s handiwork in other people, in the circumstances around them, even in the movement of history? I think it is the person who is looking for that: it’s a fact of human nature that we tend to see what we’re prepared to see. Søren Kierkegaard wrote that “purity of heart is to will one thing,” and it is this desire to see God’s work in the world that will help us see God’s work in the world, and in the life hereafter.

You know that when I go out for a walk, I often like to find something to take a picture of, and later, to share it with others. One of the reasons for this is because it’s so easy for me to remain stuck in my own head and not see the world around me. This kind of sight is easier for some of you than me, and I don’t think it’s a moral issue, except that it’s important to view the world around us, and remember this is the world we live in. So, if I see a cosmos flower with its red purples and whites shockingly vibrant against the green of the foliage around it, it’s good for me to notice that. This is a beautiful thing; this is something that God has made.

Likewise, with all aspects of life around us: worship, and speech, and rest, and work, and family, and colleagues, and sex, and psychology, and money, and things, and relationships, and on and one. Not just beauty (but beauty, also) but the hand of God and the work of God in it, and ways the love of God can mend what is broken.

Clarence Jordan writes:

Now when [people] attempt to live a double life spiritually, that is, to appear pure on the outside but are not pure in the heart, they are anything but blessed. Their conflicting loyalties make them wretched, confused, tense. And having to keep their eyes on two masters at once makes them cross-eyed, and their vision is so blurred that neither image is clear. (*Sermon on the Mount*)

The promise of the fourth beatitude is that God will grant us the desire of our hearts; the promise of the sixth assumes our desire will be to have a pure heart. By our own strength, we would be unable to achieve purity of heart, but the promise to those who hunger and thirst for this is that we will (partially, at first, and then more and more). We will be fulfilled.

Next will come making peace! But for now, may God enliven our hearts.