

“Blessed Are the Pure in Heart”
Part Seven in a Series on the Sermon on the Mount
Matthew 5:8

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ronald L. Farmer
Delivered at Oakland Christian Church, October 15, 2017

As a child, I was fascinated by television commercials. One that always puzzled me was a promotion for Ivory soap. The commercial claimed that Ivory soap was 99 and 44/100 percent pure. Having an inquisitive mind, the commercial always raised questions for me: 99 and 44/100 percent pure *what?* And *what* is the other 56/100 percent that makes up a bar of Ivory? Perhaps you’ve wondered, too.

One day, as an adult, I finally decided to research those questions. Here’s what I discovered:

It all started in 1881 when Harley Procter, son of Procter & Gamble co-founder William Procter and a legendary soap salesman in his own right, decided he needed a new angle to hawk Ivory soap. Then as now people were impressed by scientific testimonials, and Harley decided if he could come up with a lab test showing Ivory was “purer” than other soaps, he’d win sales.

Trouble was, there wasn’t a standard for purity in soap, so Harley hired an independent scientific consultant in New York to concoct one. The consultant concluded that a 100% pure soap would consist of nothing but fatty acids and alkali, the somewhat yukky sounding substances that nonetheless are the chief ingredients of most soap.

That definition having been arrived at, Harley sent out some Ivory soap for analysis and compared it with earlier analyses he’d had done of [another brand of] soap, regarded at the time as the best soap available. He was gratified to discover that by his consultant’s definition, Ivory soap was purer than the [other] soap. The impurities [in Ivory soap] consisted of uncombined alkali, 0.11%; carbonates, 0.28%; and mineral matter, 0.17%. Total: 0.56%. Thinking that “99 and 44/100% pure” had just the right touch of technical authenticity to appeal to the great unwashed, so to speak, Harley began sticking the phrase in Ivory advertisements, and another classic marketing slogan was born.¹

So now you know what the standard for pure soap is, as well as the composition of that 56/100 percent of impurity in that bar of Ivory soap you used to wash your face this morning. (Aren’t you glad you came to church today?)

“Pure” is an interesting word. We encounter it often in the Bible. Our call to worship this morning echoed Psalm 24:3-4, “Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall

stand in God's holy place? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts . . ." We find the word also in the sixth Beatitude: "Blessed are the pure in heart."

Yes, we often think of pure as a moral or spiritual term—which it is—but the word pure is used in other contexts which can help us come to an understanding of this important biblical concept. For example, we speak of pure gold, pure spring water, a pure blood Persian cat, a pure musical tone, and pure reason. Whether we are thinking of the English word or the Greek word used in the sixth Beatitude, *katharos*, the meaning is the same. At its root, the word "pure" means unmixed with any other matter; free from any contaminants or pollutants; containing nothing that does not properly belong.

What, then, did Jesus mean by the phrase, "pure in heart?" To understand that expression, we need first to examine the word "heart," or *kardia* in Greek. Obviously, he was speaking metaphorically, not referring to the remarkable muscular organ that pumps blood throughout the body. Today, we associate the metaphorical understanding of the heart with emotions; for example, consider how the heart is associated with Valentine's Day, the holiday we celebrate the wonders of human love. But our contemporary metaphorical understanding of the heart would lead us to a severely limited understanding of the sixth Beatitude. We might think that a pure heart referred only to our emotions.

But for the ancient Jews, like Jesus and his disciples, "heart" was a metaphor referring to the whole personality: not just one's emotions, but also—perhaps especially—one's mind and one's will. In short, the biblical metaphor of heart stands for the whole human psyche at its deepest level. Thus, to love with one's whole heart would, for the ancient Jews, mean to love intellectually and volitionally, as well as emotionally. That is, to love with one's mind and one's will, as well as with one's feelings. The heart represented the whole personality.

What, then, does it mean to be "pure in heart"? Well, first, let me say what it *does not* mean. Pure in heart *does not* refer to a heart that is completely free from all sin. It *does not* refer to sinless perfection. Such a notion is unattainable in this life, no matter how devout a person might be, no matter how much a person might grow spiritually. Personally, I'd settle for being 99 and 44/100 percent sinless, but alas! I fear I'd be far from even Ivory soap's standard if pure meant sinless.

The unattainability of sinless perfection was driven home to me one memorable day in seminary. My favorite among the faculty was Dr. J. W. MacGorman, a New Testament professor originally from Nova Scotia, Canada, who had a wonderful Scottish brogue. One day before class started, a group of us young seminarians were talking with him, and he made the comment that he would appreciate our prayers for a spiritual struggle he was having. I was shocked. How could this godly man, this saint-in-the-flesh, be struggling with sin? He replied that one of the marks of true spiritual growth was a greater awareness of one's sinfulness. He admitted that the sins he had struggled with as a young Christian no longer plagued him; they had long since been conquered. But, he said, as he grew spiritually he became aware of sins he

had formerly been unaware of! His honesty had a profound and lasting effect on me. His humble honesty drove home the point that sinless perfection is unattainable.

What, then, does it mean to be “pure in heart”? This wonderful expression refers to a person whose motives are unmixed; a person who is single-minded; a person who is utterly sincere without any trace of duplicity, or mixed motives, or double-mindedness. Later in the Sermon on the Mount, we will encounter additional sayings of Jesus that describe the pure in heart as those who “seek *first* the kingdom of God”;² those who have “a *healthy eye*,”³ that is, an eye that does not produce *double* vision; those who, instead of trying to serve two masters, seek to serve a “*single* master.”⁴ Thus, the pure in heart are those who single-mindedly try to do God’s will.

An outdoorsman once likened a pure heart to a compass. Just as a compass points to magnetic north, thereby serving as a reliable guide in the wilderness, so too a pure heart is a reliable compass for our individual life-journeys because a pure heart points to God.⁵ We may stray from the path at times, but our heart calls us back, because God has given us a pure heart that points us Godward.

Now if we understand that a pure heart points consistently to God, then the promise accompanying the sixth Beatitude follows logically: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” Obviously, Jesus did not mean for his disciples to take him literally. God is Spirit and thus cannot be seen with physical eyes. But Jesus assured his disciples that the pure in heart would see God metaphorically. How might we understand this?

I think we can understand “seeing God” in several ways. First, I think that the pure in heart are able to see God in the world about them, when others are blind to that divine activity. After all, they have already perceived God working in their lives, calling them to discipleship. Why should their sensitivity to God’s Spirit be limited to that initial conversion experience? I believe that the pure in heart are aware of the movements of God in their lives, even in the midst of pain, or when others are despairing. I believe that the pure in heart can, by intuition, discern the leading of God’s Spirit when others feel bereft. Jesus promised his disciples that he would not leave them alone—as “helpless orphans,” he colorfully put it—but promised that he would send them the Holy Spirit in his place.⁶ And because Jesus fulfilled this promise, the pure in heart are able to see God in the world about them.

Second, I believe there are times, rare though they may be, that the pure in heart have visions where earth and flesh fall away and they have “visions and revelations . . . that cannot be uttered by human lips,” as the Apostle Paul put it.⁷ This rare spiritual experience is usually referred to as the beatific vision, the goal of the vision quest sought by mystics of all generations. It may be rare, but I believe it does occur.

And third, I believe that all those who are pure in heart shall at last see God in the afterlife, when, to quote the Prophet of Patmos, God “will wipe away every tear” and “God’s tabernacle will be with mortals, and God will dwell with them.”⁸

What a remarkable beatitude! “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”

And that’s today’s good news. Amen

¹ Cecil Adams, “Ivory Soap is 99 and 44/100% Pure What?” (Aug. 20, 1993) *The Straight Dope* (web).

² Matt 6:33.

³ Matt 6:22-23.

⁴ Matt 6:24.

⁵ “Matthew,” in *The Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol 7 (Abingdon Press, 1959) 285.

⁶ John 14:18.

⁷ 2 Cor 12:1-4.

⁸ Rev 21:3-4.