

In Pursuit of Purity

Matthew 5:8

Introduction

Today, I would like to point out the “elephant” in the room of the Evangelical Church in America. The elephant in the room that I am thinking of is the metrics that we use to measure success when it comes to the Christian life. It is not a problem that exclusively belongs to the church in America, for it is very much a part of our culture, but I want to identify what the problem looks like in the American Church through a series of questions: If the results seem to be good, then the church, the leadership, or the person producing those results must be doing so because God approves of that particular church, leadership, and person. In other words, we tend to judge the health of an organization or person based on the results we see. In other words, if it is growing, if it is producing good results, if it looks good, and if it sounds good, then it must be healthy and God must be for it.

What I hope that you are beginning to see with the time we have spent in the beatitudes is that the metrics Jesus uses for success and spiritual health is very different than our metrics. It is not only a system Jesus uses but one we see that God uses through the pages of Scripture; one example can be found in the way the Hebrew people looked for an appropriate king to lead them. They wanted a king that met the metrics of the world around them, so they found Saul who proved to be a train wreck spiritually and emotionally (see 1 Sam. 8:1-9; 13:1-15:26). Just before God led the prophet Samuel to anoint David as the next king, because he did not meet all the metrics the other nations used to select a king, God said: **“For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart”** (1 Samuel 16:7).

We can confuse the seeming success or fruit of a nation, organization, church, or person due to skill or talent as evidence of the blessing and approval of God when all that is really seen is the evidence of skill or talent. King Saul was tall, handsome, and strong, but the approval of God was not upon him. We have seen this with some of the pastors who have fallen morally while serving for years in what seemed to be successful ministries. You can be very talented while remaining spiritually bankrupt. This was the problem with many of the religious leaders of Jesus day who looked fantastic from the outside, had the best theological education available, could quote chapter and verse of the Bible from memory, but Jesus said of some of these men:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean. “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. (Matthew 23:25–28)

As I have repeated throughout this sermon series, when we read the Sermon on the Mount and when we read any of the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), what we discover is that Jesus offers a way that is better than any other way this world can offer. In fact, Jesus' way will lead to the kind of life you and I were born for and is the only place where you can truly experience human flourishing.

The world offers all kinds of remedies to address the problem of the soul while Jesus offers himself as the antidote to cure the problem of the soul. The world and every other religion tell you that you must do, do, do to fix your inward problem, while the gospel tells us that we cannot do enough therefore Jesus did it for you.

This is why it can only be the poor in spirit, those who mourn, and the meek, who are able to receive the forgiveness of their sins because they recognize that only Jesus can satisfy their hungry and thirsty soul. Only the poor in spirit can appreciate the great mercy of God in such a way they are able share that mercy with others. Now we must answer what is meant by Jesus' sixth beatitude: "**Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God**" (v. 8). Who are the "pure in heart?"

Who are the Pure in Heart?

Before we answer the question as to who the pure in heart are, we need to understand what is meant by "heart." The heart is who a person is. The heart is who you really are; it is the center of all that you are intellectually, emotionally, and volitionally. The "heart" is that part of mankind that is an utter mess, it that part of man we read about just before God flooded the earth: "**The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually**" (Gen. 6:5). Jesus said of the heart: "**For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander**" (Matthew 15:18–19). This is the part of us that Jesus came to cure.

The promise God made throughout generations past through his prophets was that he would fix that part of us that was beyond our ability to fix ourselves. Here are three of those promises:

"And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live." (Deuteronomy 30:6)

"I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh." (Ezekiel 36:25–26)

"I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them. I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me. I will rejoice in doing them good, and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness, with all my heart and all my soul." (Jeremiah 32:39–41)

This is the promise Jesus came to fulfill, and this is the reality Jesus came to make ours. To have a pure heart is to have a clean heart that is able to respond to God in love. When you come to the cross of Christ as one mourning over your sin to have your hunger and thirst satisfied in Jesus, God will transform your heart and give you a new one that will ultimately result in new desires. Jesus' primary concern for you is not safety or comfort, but your heart. He wants your heart, and when you come to him empty handed, grieving over your sin, and ready to surrender to his will, only then will your spiritual thirst be quenched and hunger for something more be satisfied.

When Jesus said, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.", I believe he had in mind Psalm 24:3-5, which states: "**Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully. He will receive blessing from the Lord and righteousness from the God of his salvation**" (Psalm 24:3-5). You cannot expect to genuinely come to Jesus and not have him cleanse your hands and heart in a way that will forever leave you a different person. So, who are the pure in heart? The pure in heart is the person whose hunger and thirst for righteousness is satisfied in Jesus.

Who do the Pure in Heart Pursue?

The pure in heart are those who just do not receive a changed heart, but now pursue a new life. Some have read this beatitude and thought that Jesus is only referring to moral purity, and others have understood Jesus to be referring to a person's conduct. The reality is that the person whose heart has been made pure by Jesus pursues inward and outward purity. This is the person who wants to please God, desire to be in the presence of God, and no longer pursues the things that God hates.

The change of heart that happens in the person who comes to Jesus for salvation is one that is both inward and outward. When I think of the kind of change that happens in the life of a Christian, I think of William Cowper's hymn, "O! for a Closer Walk with God" where he expressed the type of longing the follower of Jesus desires:

The dearest idol I have known, whatever that idol may be;
Help me tear it from its throne, and worship only Thee."

Understand that this is the life-long experience of the Christian. It is on one hand the experience of what Paul wrote in Romans 7, "**For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.... Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death**" (vv. 19, 24). It is on the other hand a fight in which Paul describes just one chapter later in Romans: "**For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live**" (8:13).

On my shelf sits a book first published in 1656 written by the puritan, John Owen, and titled *The Mortification of Sin*. Owen's little book has stood the test of time for over 300 years for a reason, for what is written in his book is a treasure trove of godly advice as to how we can live the life the Bible calls us to. There is a line in Owen's book that has been quoted thousands of times over the years: "The choicest believers, who are assuredly freed from the condemning

power of sin, ought yet to make it their business all their days to mortify [put¹ to death] the indwelling power of sin.... Do you mortify; do you make it your daily work; be always at it while you live; cease not a day from this work; be killing sin or it will be killing you.”

The Christian was once a person who ran to his sin, and now is one who desires to flee from it. The sin that once brought pleasure to the Christian is now the sin that disgusts them. This does not mean that the Christian is free from sinning, but it does mean that they no longer seek the joy they once gained from it because they now seek to find joy in the Christ who is able to satisfy them. This is why Jesus said what he said in Matthew 10:37-39, **“Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it”** (Matthew 10:37–39).

The person who takes up his cross to follow Jesus is the pure in heart, and the place that Jesus will lead such a person is to the presence of God (see Rev. 22:1-5). So, to the one who is poor in spirit, to the one who mourns over their sin, to the meek who submit to the will of God, Jesus promises: **“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God”** (v. 8).

Conclusion

The metrics that God uses to measure success is not what you are able to do, but the transformation that he alone can accomplish through you. The metrics God uses for success is not how impressed others may be by your life and talents, but the transformation a hunger and thirst for righteousness will bring so long as you are satisfied in Jesus.

The metrics for success we ought to be using in the Church is not how impressive the pastor’s ability to speak is, how much the music moves us, or how relevant we are to the culture around us, but the transformation that God is able to do in the life of the person who finds their life in Jesus alone. This is what it means to be a Christian.

I read a true story about a man who wanted to have his name legally changed. The man’s legal name is Gary Matthews, but his friends called him, “Boomer the Dog.” For twenty years Gary was known to his friends as, “Boomer the Dog” and this is the name he petitioned Judge Ronald Folilno to have legally changed as he stated to the judge, “I’ve been known as Boomer the Dog by my friends in the community for more than 20 years. I want to bring my legal name in line with that.”

So, what was the judge to do? Judge Folilno denied Mr. Matthew’s name-change request because he believed that it would cause too much confusion and shared an example of how it could bring harm rather than good:

Petitioner witnesses a serious automobile accident and [calls 911]. The dispatcher queries as to the caller's identity, and the caller responds, "This is Boomer the Dog." It is not a stretch to imagine the telephone dispatcher concluding that the call is a prank and

¹ Kelly M. Kapic and Justin Taylor, ed. *Overcoming Sin and Temptation: Three Classic Works by John Owen* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), p. 50.

refusing therefore to send an emergency medical response. I am denying the petitioner's request.

In his memorandum, the judge concluded, “Although the petitioner apparently wishes it were otherwise, the simple fact remains that he is not a dog.”²

In the same way, just because you said a prayer or go to a church service, does not mean that you can be called a Christian. The Christian is the person who arrived at the cross of Christ as one who was poor in spirit, while mourning over their sins, and in their meekness willing to submit to the will of a holy God who invites all to the cross of his Son as the only place where their sins can be forgiven and pardoned. The evidence and proof that such a person has done so is a transforming heart that longs for a holiness that is seen in their behavior. If you have never come to Jesus in that way, then you are not really a Christian.

² *Harper's Magazine*, "Furry Logic," (December, 2010), p. 27