

“Got God?”

Matthew 5:8

Dr. Randy Working
First Presbyterian Church
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When my little brother Jeff was growing up, he developed epilepsy and sustained brain damage. As a result he suffered from seizures, sometimes as many as ten grand mal seizures a day. I was scared we'd be out in public somewhere and Jeff would have a seizure, fall down and hurt himself, and many times he did.

When Jeff was 16 years old he had the chance to travel to Montreal for a brain surgery that would remove scar tissue from his brain and help stop the seizures. My mom tried to explain the danger so Jeff could make a good decision, but Jeff said, “Mom, I can't lose!” She said, “Jeff, the operation could really help, but it's dangerous and it could kill you. What do you mean, you can't lose?”

Jeff said, “If I have the operation and it makes me better, I'll praise God for the rest of my life. If I have the operation and it makes me worse, I'll need God more, so I'll love him more. And if it kills me, then I get to go be with him. I can't lose!”

To me, Jeff knows to whom he belongs. He's someone who has single-minded focus on God, and that's what we're talking about this morning.

In ancient Israel, there were three practices that expressed what it meant to be God's people: Sabbath; circumcision, and food laws. But that wasn't all. The Old Testament Torah gives 613 laws the Jews were supposed to observe.

But in the beatitudes, Jesus doesn't give us a list of rules. He just blesses people at the center, apart from any activity, where they're the most themselves: poor in spirit, sad, powerless, hungry and thirsting for righteousness, merciful, and especially, pure in heart.

In the Jewish mindset, the heart was the center of thinking, feeling, and will. When you're pure in heart, you're clear at the center, focused on God.

We know it's not enough to look good on the outside. That's why Jesus had hard words for some religious leaders around him, and he warned them to pay attention to the inside. Jesus loves us so much he takes us exactly as we are, but he loves us too much to *leave* us as we are. He wants to change us from the inside out, not our habits but our hearts. Purity of heart is the basis for what Jesus teaches later in the Sermon on the Mount, when he says:

I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment.
(Matthew 5:21-22a)

He's saying violence and murder aren't just physical, they start from unrighteous anger. Then he goes on,

I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her *in his heart*. (Matthew 5:28)

He's saying sexual sin, sins of violence, whatever it is, it all starts from a wrong heart. That's why Jesus says later in the sermon,

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:19-21)

That's why police states don't work. They can't induce good behavior if the government is unjust by nature. You need people with an inner impulse for doing right, and if you want to really to do right, you need a change of heart.

Jesus didn't come into the world because we broke a few commands, he came because deep down we have a heart sickness, and we need a new center.

Our heart problem makes our motives so muddy. Even when we try to do the right thing, it's often because we think there's going to be a benefit to us. Now it's true that when we do right, things have a way of going better. We avoid a lot of grief by respecting the way God has designed things to go. But Jesus didn't say the pure in heart are blessed because their life will go better, or they will change society, but "because they will see God." He wants us to get the core issue right, first things first, and that's our relationship with him.

So, let's ask two questions of the text: what is it to see God? And, what is a pure heart?

First, what is it to see God?

To see God is to come into his presence. Like when you call someone for an appointment, and you say, "Can I see you today?" We're not asking to see someone from a distance, or see a picture of them on our cell phone. We want to have an appointment with them. Seeing God is being admitted into his presence. It's not to remain neutral, to kick back, but to experience his holiness. It's why David says,

Hear my voice when I call, O Lord, be merciful to me and answer me...Do not hide your face from me. (Psalm 27:7, 9)

People who are centered, who have a pure heart, are blessed with a vision of God. How does that happen? One day, we'll see God as he is in his essence, and we'll contemplate

him face to face. Until then we see him by getting clear knowledge of his Son. Jesus told his disciples,

No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. (Matthew 11:27)

It's what John explained in the opening of his gospel:

No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known. (John 1:18)

And he explained that truth to his disciples when they spoke in the Upper Room:

Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us."

Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? (John 14:8-10)

When we see God, we're not seeing *beyond* Jesus, but *through* Jesus.

That's what Jesus has in mind when he promises we will see God. For now, it's a promise we'll see him in his Son Jesus, and one day, we'll see him face-to-face in heaven. But whether up there or down here, to see God is to come into his presence.

Second, what is it to be pure in heart?

My dad grew up during the Great Depression, and when he was little he wanted a bicycle so badly, he dreamed all the time about getting a bike. He thought if just held onto the bike hard enough, then he'd be holding a real bike when he woke up. He wanted that bike with every fiber of his being.

Being pure in heart doesn't just have to do with emotions, but with our whole being. It's loving God with all our heart, soul and mind. It's to want one thing, and that one thing is the glory of God. Look how David talks about this:

Who may ascend the hill of the LORD?
Who may stand in his holy place?

He who has clean hands and a pure heart,
who does not lift up his soul to an idol
or swear by what is false. (Psalm 24:3-4)

So being pure in heart is to keep from wrongdoing. Being pure in heart has to do with guiltless hands, like the person who can go up the mountain of the LORD and stand in the holy place. Being pure in heart is when the inner core of a person is clear in thought and motivation—yes, the person who does right, who is scrupulous about the truth, and free from deceitfulness.

We all know the temptations to be dishonest. I think it often comes out of our desire to make ourselves look better than we really are.

I remember one time a few years ago in a Bible class I was teaching, some guy in the back starting challenging me with all these theories about the author of the book of Genesis. He struck me as pompous, and I got annoyed at him. I tried to respond graciously because I didn't want to look like a jerk to my class. So, in the nicest voice I could muster, I used all this terminology to make clear I knew more about the matter than he did. I said something like, "Yes, but the Graf-Wellhausen Hypothesis postulates four independent literary narrative sources within the Pentateuch: the Yahwist, the Elohist, the Deuteronomist, and the Priestly code..." The discussion went downhill from there!

But later, I was embarrassed when I thought about it. Why did I have to do that? It's like twisting a conversation around so I can make sure to mention my credentials to others.

That's not being pure in heart. I wanted to teach people God's word, but I was also wanting to put someone in his place. That's having mixed motives. It's wanting people to think you're doing something else than your real object.

Purity of heart is when you want one thing, to seek the face of the Lord. James writes,

"Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded"
(James 4:8).

Double-minded are split between the world and God. That's why Jesus said purity of heart is loving "the Lord your God with all your heart" (Matthew 22:37). But that's kind of scary, because you look inside, and you want to say, Help! I know what I'm like on the inside, how divided and diluted my heart is, and I need grace.

That brings us around to where we began. Purity of heart is wanting one thing, it's wanting God. One time a man brought his epileptic son to Jesus, and he begged Jesus,

"If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us."

"If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for him who believes."

Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" (Mark 9:22b-24)

See, having a right heart before God means *wanting* to have a right heart. It means we say, “Lord, I want to believe—but help me when I *struggle* to believe.” It’s like the apostle Paul said,

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God. (Ephesians 2:8)

If it weren’t for that, none of us would have a chance! Because who can say, “I’m there! Now I don’t have a problem with sin any more. I’m pure”? If our salvation depends on our perfection, we’d have to ask like the disciples did, “Then, who can be saved?” It’s flat-out impossible for us, but “with God, all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26). God makes our hearts pure, and that’s how we our pursuit of God is not in vain. Like David’s psalm of confession:

“Create in me a clean heart, O God.” (Psalm 51:10a)

It has to do with keeping close to the heart of God, and that’s why those who are pure of heart are those who really want only one thing, ultimately: they want God.

It’s like David says in Psalm 37:

Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart. (Psalm 37:4)

How will he do that? He’ll fill you with his Spirit.

How are you doing with that kind of purity of heart, with being clear at the center and being passionate for God? Do you want one thing? Do you want God, and to see him in all his fullness in the face of Jesus? Sometimes people have desire that puts us to shame.

Once when I was in Ohio, a friend took me to see the Cleveland Browns heroically scrape out a loss against the Denver Broncos. Now, of course, a Browns loss is not unusual. What impressed me was the commitment and desire of the fans. I went into the team store before the game and saw official NFL team jerseys going for \$300 dollars! Who has that kind of money to spend on a jersey? But 30,000 people were wearing them in the stands. That’s single-mindedness!

And I was impressed with the endless paraphernalia. Did you know you can buy foam dog claws for sale? These things must cost about 50 cents to make, and they’re sold for \$13. Who buys foam dog hands? But then I got into the stands and saw 18,000 of them. That’s commitment to your team!

Are you committed to Jesus? Because he’s so much more a sure thing than your favorite football team.

So as we're thinking about the past year and looking to what's ahead, my question for you is, "Got God?" Because he's the source, and he's good, and if you really want him above all else, he will give himself to you.

So our response should be to pursue God with a pure heart, from the core of our being, with everything we've got.

Let's not be divided, but single minded. Let's not clutter up our lives, but travel light. Because when you see God in the face of Jesus,

there's no need he can't meet,

there's no wound he can't heal,

there's no addiction he can't defeat,

and when you've got God, the devil can't beat us.

Because

the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness therein,

The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the Lord,

and he owns the cattle on a thousand hills,

and he's able to make every blessing of yours overflow for you, so that in every situation you will always have all you need for any good work.

So trust in the Lord with all your heart. You will see God, and that's the greatest possible thing.