

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Wonderful News for the Pure in Heart
The Rev. Dr. John Judson
October 25, 2020

Psalm 24; Matthew 5:8

He needed a new angle to hawk his product. He knew that it was good and that the people who used it liked it. It did exactly what it was intended to do and was as good or better than the competition. But as any good businessperson knows, simply having a good product, perhaps even the best product, is not enough if people don't buy it...if people don't believe it's better. So, because people like science he had his product evaluated alongside the competition. Though his product was composed of the same basic chemical ingredients, it turned out that his product had only .56% impurities. At first this did not seem to Harley to be all that big of a deal. But then, in a light bulb moment, in a once in a lifetime genius marketing revelation, it came to Harley Proctor. On the box of every bar of his product he would print, Ivory soap, 99.44% pure. And it worked. Ivory soap soon became the go to brand for millions. This morning then, I want us to hold onto Harley's 99.44% pure idea, because that is the concept behind the word pure, in pure in spirit. Pure means to be without impurities, to be completely of one thing. So, with that in mind, the question for us becomes, what does it mean to be without impurities in our heart?

To answer this, we need to once again take a quick trip in our Way-Way-Back-Biblical Time Machine so that we are sitting on the grass with the crowd that is listening to Jesus. And when we do, we will discover two things about what the crowd is hearing when Jesus says, there is wonderful news for the pure in heart. The first thing that we would discover is that heart in Greek, is not the seat of the affections. It is not where love comes from. It is not what would be put on Valentines. Instead the heart is the seat of the will. The heart is the place in which choices and decisions are made. In other words, a person would have a wise heart, meaning they made wise choices, or a foolish heart, meaning they made foolish choices. So to have a 99.44% pure heart would mean to have a heart that makes 99.44% pure choices...more about this in a minute.

The second thing we would discover is that the instant Jesus said the words "pure heart" the minds of the people would immediately go to Psalm 24. They would go there because the concept of pure heart is integral to this Psalm and this Psalm is one with which they would have been familiar. They would have been familiar with Psalm 24 because it was used by Jewish pilgrims when they made their annual trek to the Temple in Jerusalem. Think again about the words. "Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord and who shall stand in his Holy Place? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts." These are the words that would be repeated year after year after year as pilgrims climbed the steps in the Temple, or ascended the Hill of the Lord, so they could offer their sacrifices. And not only would they know the words, they would know what the words meant. The words meant that those who came to the Temple were to have made 99.44% pure choices, or choices that aligned with the Law of Moses, or put another way the law of loving God and loving neighbor. Let me say that again, to have a pure heart is to have 99.44% of our choices reflect love of God and love of neighbor.

The wonderful news Jesus offers to those whose decisions reflect loving God and neighbor is that they get to see God. Again, to understand this we need to return to the Psalm. Let's listen one more time. "Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully. They will receive blessing from the Lord, and vindication from the God of their salvation." For those literally ascending the steps to the Temple these words meant they were meeting God. And in meeting God, they were being loved, forgiven and empowered by God, to love God and neighbor more fully. This means the same for us. That when we approach God with pure hearts, with decisions that are 99.44% aligned with loving God and neighbor, we get to encounter God and be blessed; be blessed with the love of God, with the forgiveness of God, with the very presence of God. In a sense to go back to Pastor Bethany's sermon from last week, we get to pull up a chair with God and live in God's life transforming presence. This all sounds wonderful...except for one thing...how do we get these pure hearts?

I realize that having our choices reflect love of God and neighbor is not a simple thing. So how then are we to do so? My answer comes from photography. I got my first nice camera when I went into the Peace Corps. My parents thought that I ought to keep a visual record of my time in the Philippines. Back then, everything about photography was manual. You had to set your aperture. You had to set your focus. You had to choose your film speed. Today though things have changed. Almost all modern cameras have an auto mode. Everything is set for you including the focus. One of my cameras will autofocus in .02 seconds...yes that is .02 seconds. Which is wonderful until...until the camera doesn't know what to focus on. I discovered this years ago when our former Associate Pastor, Amy Morgan and I were making the very first set of confirmation videos. We were recording down by the Rouge River Corridor and Amy was next to some trees and bushes. We did the video, but then when I went back to watch it on my computer, it was obvious that the camera was confused. It was hunting focus, meaning that one moment it would focus on Amy and the next on the bush. In and out it went.

My friends, this is the problem with trying to have pure hearts...to make decisions that are 99.44% in alignment with loving God and neighbor. We have our lives set on autofocus, meaning rather than focusing on what would loving God and loving neighbor look like in all our decisions, our heart focuses on other things. It focuses on what would make us look better. What would make us more successful. What would make us more money. What would...what would...what would. Our hearts hunt for focus and often focus on the wrong things. If we want to change this; if we want to move closer and closer to having 99.44% pure hearts, then we need to take our hearts off auto focus and put them on manual focus. We need to constantly ask this question...what does love require of me? What does loving God and neighbor require of me in each and every decision I make. If we are willing to do that, then we will be on the path toward not only having pure hearts, but of seeing God.

My challenge for you then is this, that throughout this week and in the weeks to come, as you are making decisions that matter to ask yourselves, what does love require of me? And then allow that focus to help you shed the impurities of anger, prejudice and fear and allow your heart to become closer and closer to 99.44% pure.