

## MATTHEW 5.8: HAPPY ARE THE PURE IN HEART

[Chelmsford, Sunday morning 6 November 2011]

### I HAVE BAD NEWS FOR YOU

On the front of a birthday card was a picture of a young angel with wings on her back, a halo on her head, a flower in her hand, and a smile on her face, standing on a cloud. At the top of the card there were the words: *‘Only a person with a clean mind and a pure heart can open this birthday card’*. But in fact the card could not be opened – the two sides of the card were glued together. On the back of the card was a picture of the same angel, but this time with a sheepish grin on her face. The caption then read: *‘Oh well, have a Happy Birthday anyway’*.

**‘Happy’**, said Jesus, **‘are the pure in heart; they will see God’**.

Or in the words of Psalm 24: **“Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? Who shall stand in his holy place? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts”** (NRSV). Or in the words of the GNB, **‘Those who are pure in act and in thought’** – they have the right **‘to enter God’s holy temple’**.

Let’s be honest, that is a pretty tall order.

I once read of an Anglican minister who one Christmas Eve stood at the church door and administered a breathalyser test to all his parishioners who came to the Midnight Service. Those who exuded excessive alcohol fumes were turned away.

But suppose it were possible to do a text of people’s hearts, how many of us would be deemed to be pure in heart?

When the Bible speaks of the **‘heart’**, it does not have in mind the physical heart which sends blood around the body.

No, to quote one learned commentator, *“in the Bible the heart is the real or true self, the psyche at its deepest level”*. The heart is the place where we think and feel; the heart is the real me.

Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount had a lot to say about the human heart.

- He said, for instance, **“You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery’. But now I tell you: anyone who looks at a woman and wants to possess her is guilty of committing adultery with her in his heart”** (5.27).
- Later on in the sermon he attacked the religious hypocrites of his day who were concerned for outward show - who, for instance, wanted people to see how generous they were in giving, how pious they were in praying, how dedicated they were in fasting. But the reality is, says Jesus, you may impress others, but **“your Father, who sees what you do in private”** (6.18), he knows what is really in your heart – he knows the kind of person you really are.
- A test of who you are, Jesus went on, is your attitude to money and to possessions. **“Store up riches for yourselves in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy, and robbers cannot break in and steal. For your heart will always be where your riches are”** (6.20-21).

Which one of us here this morning would pass the ‘heart’ test?  
Which one of us here this morning could open the birthday card?

Let’s be honest, not one of us.

We may say all the right things, we may do all the right things, but when it comes to what we really think, when it comes to what really motivates in life, it is a different story.

We may seem religious, but in fact our hearts can be desperately out of tune with the heart of God.

Many years ago the prophet Jeremiah heard God saying: “**Who can understand the human heart? There is nothing else so deceitful; it is too sick to be healed. I the Lord, search human minds and test human hearts**” (Jer 17.9,10).

Yes, the reality is not just that we deceive others – but that we deceive ourselves. All too often we believe our motives are the best, but in fact – on examination – they are nothing of the sort. But God sees – God knows – he tests our hearts and he finds us to be wanting.

Yes, this is the bad news:

- Writing to the church at Rome, the apostle Paul said: “**All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God**” (Rom 3.23 NRSV) – or as Peterson puts it in his paraphrase: “*we are utterly incapable of living the glorious lives God wills for us*”. We have all missed the mark.
- Or to quote the apostle John in his first letter: “**If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and there is no truth in us**” (1 John 1.8).

None of us are pure in heart.

And if we pretend otherwise, then we are a bunch of hypocrites.

From the perspective of the Psalmist, none of us are really fit to worship God; or in the words of Jesus, none of us have any hope of seeing God.

Wow. This is all pretty depressing stuff.

To make matters worse, you have come to church to be inspired and to feel uplifted, and what have I done? I have thrown your failings into your face.

It’s enough to make you give up on church altogether!

## **I HAVE GOOD NEWS FOR YOU**

But thank God, I have good news for you too.

There is hope for even the most hopeless of people

- The apostle Paul may have said “**all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God**”, but he went on to say, “**by the free gift of God’s grace all are put right with him through Christ Jesus, who sets them free. God offered him, so that by his blood he should become the means by which people’s sins are forgiven through their faith in him**” (Rom 3.24,25)

- The apostle John may have said, “**If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and there is no truth in us**”, but he went on to say “**If we confess our sins to God, he will keep his promise and do what is right: he will forgive us our sins and purify us from all wrongdoing**” (John 1.9).

Yes, note the little word “**all**” – Jesus can purify us from “**all**” wrongdoing. Sin does stain, it does spoil, but there is no sin too dreadful or too deep for God to deal with. However badly we may have let God down, however badly we have behaved toward others, there is always the possibility of forgiveness.

A few years ago Elie Wiesel, the winner of the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize, spoke at a commemoration ceremony of the liberation of Auschwitz, the German concentration camp, by the Soviet army. His words chilled me to the bone: “*Although we know that God is merciful, please God, do not have mercy on those who created this place. God for forgiveness, do not forgive these murders of Jewish children here... God, merciful God, do not have mercy on those who had no mercy on Jewish children*”

The crimes of Auschwitz were heinous in extreme – they were almost beyond belief. And yet, even such fiendish horrors can be forgiven. For the good news is that nobody can stoop lower than the Son of God, when he bore the sin of the world for us all.

There is forgiveness. No sin is beyond the mercy of God. Listen to what God said through the prophet Isaiah (1.18): “**Now, let’s settle the matter. You are stained red with sin, but I will wash you as clean as snow. Although your stains are deep red, you will be as white as wool**”.

Whatever the adverts on TV say, there are some stains that soap powder seems to deal with – even Persil which ‘*washes whiter*’ has its limitations. But, as the father of my first worship band leader once said, Jesus, through his death on the Cross, is ‘*the perfect detergent*’ (Kenneth MacKenzie). He purifies us from all wrongdoing. Because of Jesus we may see God!

## **GOD DESIRES SINCERITY**

So far, so good. All that I have said to this point has been prompted by this sixth beatitude. But the truth is that I have not really said what Jesus had in mind. When Jesus spoke of the ‘**pure in heart**’, he was not thinking of those whose hearts had been put right by his death. Rather, when Jesus said, ‘**Happy are the pure in heart**’, he was speaking of God’s desire for sincerity.

Let me explain, the underlying Greek word here is *katharos* – the Greek word from which we get the name ‘Catherine’.

- Originally *katharos* meant ‘*clean*’: it was the word people used of clean water – the water was clean, it was pure, it was like that of a mountain stream free from all dirt and impurity.
- Later *katharos* came to mean, ‘unmixed/unadulterated’: e.g. ‘pure’ corn was corn which had been winnowed and sifted and was no longer mixed with chaff; a ‘pure’ army was an army purged of the discontented, the cowardly, the ineffective – it was a first-class fighting force.

“**Happy are the pure in heart**”, said Jesus: i.e. happy are those whose thoughts and motives are unmixed with anything devious, ulterior or base.

Happy are those who are not deceitful or hypocritical in their so-called walk with God.

Or as JB Philips put it in his translation, ‘*Happy are the utterly sincere, for they will see God*’.

- Happy are those who do not say one thing and mean another.
- Happy are those who do not play religious games
- Happy are those who at the very core of their being are 100% genuine in their Christian discipleship.

‘*Happy are the utterly sincere*’.

But the pure in heart are not just sincere; they are ‘single-hearted’ in the sense of being single-minded.

As they seek to live out their faith, they are single-minded in their devotion toward God.

They want to go all out for him.

In the words of William Temple, a former archbishop of Canterbury, they have ‘*a passionate aspiration towards the holiness of God*’

Or in the words of Jesus, ‘**they seek first the kingdom of God**’ – they are concerned above everything else with the Kingdom and with what God requires of them (see GNB)

It is the sincere – the single-minded, who really mean business with God – who will see God.

We cannot, of course, see God in this world.

But the day is coming when we shall see God.

John in his description of the new Jerusalem, says of the redeemed who are before the throne of God: “**They will see his face**” (Rev 22.4)

Or as Paul writes to the church at Corinth: “**What we see now is like a dim image in a mirror, then we shall see face to face**” (1 Cor 13.12)

“**My dear friends**”, wrote the apostle John, “**we are now God’s children, but it is not yet clear what we shall become. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is**” (1 John 3.2)

For those of us who seek to be followers of Jesus, here is a challenge – a challenge to be what we profess to be – too sincere single-minded followers of Jesus

Along with the challenge, there is also an assurance: that those who are sincere and single-minded in their Christian discipleship, will indeed one day see God. What a wonderful thought.

But there is not just a word for Christians – but also for those who have yet to go the way of Jesus. There is a way for us to be put right with God.

If you will but face up to reality and confess our sin, Jesus will forgive – he will purify in the innermost recesses of hearts – so that you too may one day see God.

So let us bow our heads and close our eyes

If you have never experienced the cleansing power of Jesus in your life, let me encourage you now to say: *‘Lord Jesus, come into my life to be my Saviour and my Friend; come into my life, cleanse me from all that is wrong and by your grace help me to follow you all the rest of my days’.*