

July 24, 2022

Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing

Matthew 5:6, 8; 6:1-6, 16-33

We continue our sermon series from Matthew today, and so of course we are reading from Isaiah. We read Isaiah 58, verses 1-9.

58 Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet!

Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins.

*² Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of
their God;*

they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God.

³ 'Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?'

Look, you serve your own interest on your fast-day, and oppress all your workers.

⁴ Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist.

Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.

⁵ Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself?

Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?

Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?

⁶ Is not this the fast that I choose:

to loosen the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke,

to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

*⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?*

*⁸ Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rearguard.*

⁹ Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;

you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

In the 1840s there was a great Danish thinker named Søren Kierkegaard. He is regarded today as one of the giants of nineteenth century thought, and one of the founders of what later came to be called Existentialism. Later existentialists, though, didn't always know what to do with Kierkegaard. They tended to be at least neutral to and often directly opposed to religion, but a central part of Kierkegaard's philosophy was that true happiness was found only in a radical commitment to Jesus Christ. Anne LaMott, the modern Christian writer, discovered God during a lecture on one Kierkegaard's books – *Fear and Trembling*. Another of his books, built largely on the Sermon of the Mount, begins with Matthew 5:8: *Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God*. That book has a marvelous title: *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*. And that's where we're going today, as we return to our examination of the Sermon on the Mount.

One of the pervasive themes of this great sermon is this: We are to have one goal, we are to will one thing. What is that? The Kingdom of God. Okay, we're going to need more than that. What does that mean? In our lives, the Kingdom of God appears as righteousness. What are we to will? Righteousness.

Sounds awful, huh? That's because that word has been so abused in common speech. When we hear it now, it's an insult. "He's so *righteous!*" means something like "He's such an insufferable, priggish snot!" Righteousness is thus equated with *self-righteousness*. We don't want that. Nobody wants that. The passage you heard a moment ago from Isaiah specifically attacks that sort of righteousness-on-display. There God says, "I'm not interested in your ostentatious sackcloth-and-ashes fasting displays. Here's the fast I'm looking for: fight injustice, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, set the prisoner free." Jesus agrees. Matthew 6, verse 1: *Beware of practicing your piety before men, that you may be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.* This means that any "righteousness" that we do for show, to draw attention to ourselves, isn't really righteousness. Jesus goes on to give examples. First, 6:2-4: *Thus, when you give alms, sound no trumpets before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and streets, that they may be praised by men. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your alms may be in secret. And your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you.* Giving gifts of mercy is a good thing, but if we're doing it for show, God isn't impressed. A friend told me once that in his childhood church, there was a special pew reserved for the person who had given the most money to the church the previous month. My friend's father, a banker, loved sitting in that pew. I hope he loved it anyway; according to Jesus, that's all the credit he would ever get. (By the way, that sort of righteousness does have an effect on others; it was enough to drive my friend away from God for the next thirty-five years.)

Here's another example, 6:4-5: *And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and street corners, that they may be seen by men. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door, and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.* Prayer that is done for applause is not prayer; it's performance art. I can't even begin to tell you much I struggle with this one. As I lead prayers in services, or every time I am called on to pray at the beginning of gatherings, there is always – every single time – the danger of trying to be eloquent at the expense of being real. But the prayer done to impress people is a street show. It has nothing to do with righteousness.

One more example, fasting, from 6:16-18: *And when you fast, do not look dismal, as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by men. Truly, I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may be in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.* As you may know from earlier sermons, I believe in the judicious use of fasting, but just like giving and praying, fasting that is done to impress people is worthless in the eyes of God. Once, back in my Baptist days, I got a phone call from a denominational office. They were promoting a day of prayer and fasting for all the churches in the Southern Baptist Convention, and wondered if we'd be interested. Well, I was, so I asked for more information. The denominational rep told me about the many huge churches that would be involved, all linked together by modern satellite communications. (This is pre-Zoom.) Then she asked, "Er, you *do* have a satellite link at your church, don't you?" No. We were a church of about thirty, meeting in rented quarters in a basement. "Oh," she said. "I'm sorry. Well, thank you very much." Click. Evidently they only wanted fasting that could be televised. That's not righteousness. That's posing. And that's not what Jesus was talking about.

So all that is what righteousness is not. What *is* righteousness? In Matt 5:6 we read this: *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.* Righteousness is when our desire to be with Christ is greater than our desire even for food and drink. But there's more in this deceptively simple teaching. Righteousness is not something you achieve; it is something you seek. The key question is not "*Are you righteous?*"; it's "*Are you seeking righteousness?*" If so, you will be satisfied. This is one of the key paradoxes of the Christian journey: As long as we *seek* God's righteousness, why then we're almost there. But, the second we think that we've achieved it and stop seeking, it's gone.

But let's go back to the idea of seeking God instead of earthly things. Jesus elaborates on this in 6:19-21: *Do not lay up treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume, and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not consume and thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.* What is it that you long for, that you dream of having: wealth, independence, knowledge, security, a family? These aren't all bad, but if any of these things is your ultimate goal, you *will* be disappointed. Moreover, all these things can be lost in a second. No treasure is safe, except the treasure of the Kingdom of God. If we seek anything else before God's kingdom, we lose it all. Chapter 6, verse 24: *No man can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.* I know that's hard. We spend most of our waking hours meeting the demands of this world: demands from work, from family, from church, from our country. But in the end, Jesus says, we must have one loyalty, one master, one treasure, and one ultimate goal. Purity of heart is to will one thing.

Up to this point, I've talked about what we must do, what God expects from us, and other than a few vague future promises (reward in heaven, treasures in heaven), there hasn't been much about what God does. Now I come to the good news. When we set our heart on God's righteousness and God's kingdom, then our reward – not in the sweet by and by but now – is nothing less than contentment. Those who seek God first, in fact, may be the only really happy people. Matthew 6, verses 25-32:

Therefore, I tell you, do not be anxious about your life – what you shall eat, or what you shall drink – or about your body – what you shall wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow, nor reap, nor gather into barns, but your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to your span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field; they neither toil nor spin, but I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like these. If God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is cast into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying "What shall I eat?" or "What shall I drink?" or "What shall I wear?" For the Gentiles seek these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom, and his righteousness, and all these things will be yours as well.

So do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let today's trouble be sufficient for the day.

The gift of God to those who seek the kingdom, is peace, freedom from anxiety, because God will care for us.

No, this is not the Prosperity Gospel, as taught by prominent television preachers. This is not “Do these things, and God will give us whatever we want.” This is different. This is “Forget what we want. Our earthly desires only twist us up in anxious knots, because we know that they can disappear in a day. God knows what we need – even if we sometimes forget – and will see to them *if we allow it.*” Our task, our part, is to seek God’s kingdom, seek God’s righteousness and trust God to take care of the rest.

I know. That may be the hardest thing of all. Some of us seem to cherish the gnawing anxieties that keep us awake at night and can’t stand the thought of giving them up. As a pastor I’m always pointing out to anxious people that worrying about things that are out of their control accomplishes nothing, which is true, but pretty useless. You can’t stop worrying about something just by *deciding* to stop worrying about it. Try that at three am. It’s also hypocritical of me, since I do the same thing. But there is a way to be free from anxiety, a positive way: turn our eyes away from what we have and what we do not have, and toward the Kingdom of God.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Purity of heart is to will one thing.

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Prayer:

God, how am I supposed to do this? How do I not worry about my needs?
How do I put your kingdom before food and shelter?
How do I let go to that extent?
I’m okay with trusting you for spiritual comfort, but this feels a bit much.
I don’t like giving up control of *important* things.
Can you at least take me to the next step of trust?

Lord, I really don’t know what I’m doing,
but I think I’m seeking to do better.
And I believe that just seeking counts for something,
that the desire for your righteousness goes a long way toward finding it.
So guide me to the next resting spot, and sit with me while I catch my breath. Amen.