

How To See God

SERIES: *THE LIFE GOD BLESSES*

Everybody told me that sooner or later it would happen, but I didn't believe them. They said it would happen almost overnight some time in my mid-forties. I thought it might happen, but I also thought maybe I was different. It wouldn't happen to me until my sixties. You see, I have always had 20/20 vision. I was the guy who prided myself on knowing the tiniest letters on the eye chart. But it did happen. I squint. I move my small print Bible back and forth. I warn you now that one Sunday soon I will dawn some sporty new reading glasses!

In physical life, as we grow older, our capacity to see diminishes. In spiritual life, it's the other way around: the more we grow, the better we see. We find that the things we once needed help to see, the things that were once blurry, are now coming more into focus.

In the sixth Beatitude, Jesus talks about seeing God. He says "**Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.**" The thing we see better as we grow older in our faith is God. He's the One who is coming more into focus. He's the One who is becoming more sharply defined.

Yet this statement raises some questions. How is it possible to really see God? I mean, doesn't the Bible say something about how no person can see God and live through the experience? Didn't Moses only get to see the "back side" of God as he passed by? Didn't Isaiah practically melt when he saw a vision of God's glory in the Temple? If those guys couldn't handle it, how could I? For some of us, seeing God is a scary prospect; we're not sure if we want to see God.

If we could see God and live through it, it seems to me this would be the very climax of spiritual life. Spiritual masters have always seen the vision of God to be the end all, and yet here in the Beatitudes it's buried in the middle of the list. Why isn't this first or even last on the list? To answer these questions, we have to understand what Jesus meant by seeing God.

I. What does it mean to see God?

I don't believe Jesus had in mind some kind of ecstatic experience like that of Moses or Isaiah. He's not talking about some kind of one-time vision where for just a few seconds we get to see God in all his glory. It's funny, I've read the Gospels over and over and I'm not aware of any

time Jesus had an experience like that. Paul had some amazing experiences. On the road to Damascus, he was knocked off his horse by a blinding light and he heard the voice of Jesus. On another occasion, he says he was caught up into Paradise where he heard unspeakable words. But Paul never says he saw God.

Jesus has something else in mind. He's talking about perceiving God, understanding God, seeing him through the eyes of faith. This is a theme right here in Matthew's Gospel. In Matthew 13 Jesus spoke of those who "**while seeing they do not see.**" He says, "**they have closed their eyes, otherwise they would see...**" (Mt. 13:13, 15). He's talking about spiritual sight. A couple of chapters later, Jesus called the Pharisees "blind guides" because they were blind to spiritual things; to the reality of who God is.

We can trace this theme in the rest of the NT as well. Paul prayed in Ephesians that the "**eyes of your hearts would be enlightened...**" (Eph. 1:18). In 2 Corinthians 3:18 he describes the believer as "**beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord**" and "**being transformed into that same image.**" The writer of Hebrews says that Moses left Egypt, not fearing the wrath of Pharaoh, because he saw him who is invisible (Heb. 11:27). This is not talking about some vision Moses had; it's talking about his faith-awareness of God's presence and reality.

We perceive God in his creation. Last week I met some friends in Yosemite for the day. We hiked up to Yosemite Falls and if you've never seen those falls in early Spring, you're missing something. We saw Half Dome and El Capitan and we couldn't help but see God in the midst of his creation. Someone else could hike that trail and see nothing but Mother Nature, but we saw something of the greatness and love of God.

We also perceive God in the circumstances and experiences of everyday life. We see his hand both in the good times and the bad times. We see him in the small things and in the big things. What someone else might see as coincidence, we see as Providence.

Of course, there is another sense in which we see God. It won't happen until we see him face to face. In John 17 Jesus prays that his disciples would one day be

with him in heaven, “so that they may see my glory which you have given me” (Jn. 17:24). Paul says, “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face” (1 Cor. 13:12). John writes in Revelation that “his bond-servants will serve him; they will see his face” (Rev. 22:4).

Seeing God means we perceive him now with the eyes of faith and we see him later in all his glory. But this isn't for everybody. Jesus says this blessing is reserved for the pure in heart.

II. Who are the ones who will see God?

It seems that who we are determines what we see. In physical sight, the organ that matters is the eye. In the spiritual realm, the organ that matters is the heart. The condition of our heart determines the capacity of our spiritual eyes.

Why is the heart so important? We think of the heart as specifically dealing with our emotions. We say, “My heart goes out to you,” and we mean we feel for someone in their pain. Tony Bennett sings, “I left my heart in San Francisco,” and we know that means he has a great affection for that city. But the Bible uses this word to speak of something quite different. In the Bible, the heart is the very core of the whole personality. It deals with our affections, but it also deals with our thinking and our decisions. It's the totality of our being: mind, will and emotions. That's why Proverbs warns us, “**Watch over your heart with all diligence, because from it flow the springs of life**” (Prov. 4:23). It's in the heart that the direction of our life is determined.

It's interesting that Jesus didn't just say that the pure are blessed, he said the pure in heart are blessed. Throughout his ministry, he emphasized that it is what's on the inside of a person that really matters, not what's on the outside. Jesus said to the Pharisees, “**You clean the outside of the cup and the dish, but inside you are full of robbery and self-indulgence.**” He told them to first clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside may become clean also. (Mt. 23:25-26).

I have a coffee mug that I keep here at church. It has a cover on it. Every once in a while I will forget about it and leave it on my desk for a few days with some coffee in it without opening it up. When I take the lid off, it's not a pretty sight. I like strong coffee, but not that strong! What if I looked inside and put the lid back on? What if I took it into the bathroom and scrubbed the cover off the outside? Better yet, what if I took it outside and power washed it? What if I found a whole bunch of really nice looking coffee mugs and placed it next to them? What if I got a sticker that said “Fine China Made in England” and put it on the outside? What if I put it on an airplane to travel around the world and it got to visit all the mugs of the world? What if I sent it to a

convention where some of the great mugs of the world were gathering to talk about growing in mugliness? What if I did all that, and then I opened up the lid, what would I see? I would see stinky green coffee.

But that's what we do. We try to clean the outside of the mug and we ignore the inside. We clean our act up; we power wash our behavior. We try to surround ourselves with the right kind of company. We slap on a sticker; maybe it's a WWJD bracelet, or a cross around our neck, or a sticker for our car. We travel to conferences and listen to great speakers. But we never deal with the inside; we never deal with the heart.

A survey was done of seminary students and their spirituality. They were asked the question, “What does it take to be a good Christian?” The answers could be categorized into five groups. One group said a good Christian attends Sunday School. A second said a good Christian goes to church. A third group said a good Christian goes to the special prayer meetings. A fourth group said a good Christian gives a tenth of his income to the church. Finally, a fifth group said a good Christian leads others to Jesus. Do you know what that is? That's cleaning the outside of the mug. That's religion. The problem with religion is that it doesn't get to the heart of the matter.

Who we are determines what we see. It's the condition of our heart that determines the capacity of our eyes. Jesus says the kind of heart that sees God is the heart that is pure. What does that mean? This is one of those words that can be easily misunderstood. It may be best to say first what it doesn't mean. It doesn't mean to be a prude. So often we think of purity in terms of sexuality. We think of those who are pure as those who never think about sex; they just think about God. This sort of goes along with what I would call the “monkish” view of purity. The monks thought the only way to stay pure was to escape the world and just contemplate God. Purity was defined as being unhinged from things like sex and food and the pleasures of this world. But they seemed to forget that God created all these things for us to enjoy. He created sex. It was his idea. He created good food and all the pleasures of creation.

One of my favorite phrases in all the Bible is found in Genesis 2:9, “**And the Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground, trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food.**” Isn't that great!? God didn't have to make them “pleasing to the eye.” He gave us the majestic oaks and the towering redwoods and the flowering pear as a feast for the eyes! He didn't have to make it “good for food.” He could have just given us dog food every day. You know - Kibble. But he gave us this smorgasbord of creation so we could make eggs benedict and cherries jubilee and fruit compote. Whatever purity is, it has to embrace all of God's creation. Paul wrote to Titus, “**To the**

pure, all things are pure, but to those who are corrupted and do not believe, nothing is pure" (Tit. 1:15).

The word Jesus uses here for "pure" basically has two meanings. First, it means "clean." This word was actually used to describe garments that were clean. When we talk about having a "clean heart" we are talking about a heart that is not defiled by sin. I actually don't believe that's the primary meaning here. The second meaning of the word is the idea of being unmixed, single-minded, without hypocrisy. Maybe the word that best captures the meaning is the word "sincere." To be sincere means to be genuine; to be free from falsehood.

Turn back to Psalm 24. I think Jesus had this Psalm in mind when we spoke this Beatitude. Look at verse 3, **"Who may ascend into the hill of the Lord? And who may stand in His holy place?"** David is instructing those who are going up to Jerusalem to worship the Lord. He wants them to know what should be true of their lives. Look at v. 4, **"He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not lifted up his soul to falsehood, and has not sworn deceitfully."** There are three parallel lines here. The person with "clean hands and a pure heart" is the one who "does not lift up his soul to falsehood and has not sworn deceitfully." The idea is that as she relates to both God and other people she is utterly sincere; she is a person with whom you get what you see; there are no masks; there is no hidden agenda; they aren't one thing here and another thing there. The other night they gave an Oscar for film editing. If their life were a film, there would be no need to edit. I like what John Stott says: "Some people weave round themselves such a tissue of lies that they can no longer tell which part of them is real and which part is make believe."

As a young man I had had the privilege of being around the late Ray Stedman. For 35 years Ray was pastor at PBC. I met Ray when I was twenty-two. Over the years I listened to many of his sermons. I traveled with him to Brazil. He preached at my ordination. He spoke right on this stage when we dedicated this building. He wrote dozens of books and spoke all over the world. One of the things I appreciated the most about him was that he was the same everywhere he went. It didn't matter who he was with. I saw him with so-called important people and I saw him those who for years had admired him from afar. He was the same with them all. He was the same sitting in a movie theater eating popcorn as he was preaching in front of a thousand people. When he prayed in those settings, he sounded just like he did an hour before when he prayed over dinner. More than anyone I have ever known, he was free from falsehood. That's being pure in heart.

Of course Jesus Christ was alone among men in being absolutely pure in heart. But Jesus sets this before us as a quality to embrace for ourselves. How can we be pure in heart?

III. How do we become pure in heart?

Let me start with an image. Every once in a while we will be driving on Highway 80 east towards the mountains. We come to that oil refinery with those huge tanks and that jungle of tubes and pipes and generators. It looks like a giant Tinker Toy set. Sometimes my kids say, "What's that, Dad?" I tell them it's an oil refinery. And they say, "Well, what's an oil refinery do?" Now we are bordering on the limits of my knowledge! But I say something like it, "Well, it refines the oil so we can use it in our car."

The refinery does for oil what our hearts should do for us. For us to have pure hearts, our heart has to go through a refining process. You see, no one is born with a pure heart. The Bible says the heart of every man is a cesspool of evil. Jesus said out of the heart comes murders and adulteries and lies and slanders (Mt. 15:1-20). It's not about the environment; it's about the heart. So the heart has to be refined. How does that happen?

The answer comes right here in this list of Beatitudes. I hope you have noticed that we have been emphasizing this throughout this study. Jesus didn't just pick eight important qualities, shuffle the deck, and then lay them out. The Beatitudes come in an important sequence. Each one grows out of what is previous.

The refining process begins with the first three. The poor in spirit recognize their spiritual bankruptcy and come to God out of need. Those who mourn feel the emotional weight of their sin; they grieve over how wicked their heart really is. When you do that, you become meek; you see how small and dependent you are.

The fourth Beatitude grows out of the first three. As we see our true condition, we begin to hunger and thirst for God's righteousness. And he begins to fill us. As we experience his mercy, we can then show that same mercy to others, and we begin to operate toward others with sincerity. Our hearts are becoming pure.

But guess what? It's a cycle. We have to keep going through the refining process. We never stop being needy people. It's as we experience this cycle, over and over again, that we grow in purity of heart. Purity is not sinless perfection, but it's a refining that comes through the process of dealing honestly with our sin before God and receiving mercy.

David is the premier example of this in the Bible. In Psalm 78 Scripture says David **"shepherded Israel according to the integrity of his heart."** And yet, what do we know about David? David was quite a sinner. We all know

about his affair with Bathsheba and how he arranged for her husband to be killed. He hid it for a year and then God sent Nathan to confront David. David said, "I have sinned," and immediately Nathan said, "God has forgiven you." But it didn't stop there. David had to walk through the pain of seeing consequences lived out in his family. A child died. A son usurped his own throne and was later murdered. Late in his life he disobeyed God and took a census of the people. After all he'd been through he started to rely on numbers rather than on God. But through all of this David kept coming back to God. He kept praying the prayer of Psalm 51, "**Create in me a clean heart, O God.**" He goes through that cycle of coming to God out of need, grieving over his sin, seeing himself for who he truly was, hungering for righteousness, and receiving God's mercy. Out of those refining experiences, he became more and more pure, and his vision of God became clearer.

As our heart is refined, our desire and our capacity to see God grows. We see him as more good and gracious than we ever imagined. You might be sitting here today thinking, "I'm the furthest thing from a pure heart. I will never see God." But, I want you to know, purity of heart starts with recognizing your own need. As you come to him out of need, you will experience his mercy; his filling. Out of that refining process, you will grow in purity, and you will begin to see God.

CONCLUSION

This morning we are taking Communion. Communion ought to be viewed as part of this cycle. We come out of need; we come with our sin. Remember how Jesus washed the feet of his disciples? We all come here this morning with dirt on our feet. It's inevitable as we walk barefooted through this dirty world. We need him to wash us. He washes us through his broken body and shed blood. As we confess our sin and experience his mercy, we begin to see him. As long as our hearts are pure, the older we get, the better we will see. And the day will come when we will see him face to face. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

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