

## **Blessed Are the Pure in Heart**

Matthew 5:8

Dr. Michael Helms

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When I was a boy and my mother called me to the table for a meal there was a requirement that I had to wash my hands before I could sit at the table and eat. It didn't have anything to do with religion. It was good hygiene.

Two thousand years ago, people didn't know what we know about germs. Their ritual washings before meals served hygienic purposes but their washings before meals were religious more than practical.

The Jews believed that God was holy and that we are not, which is true.

They believed that they were contaminated with their own sin, but that other things could also contaminate them, like certain diseases, or touching people who had certain diseases, touching something or someone dead, eating unclean foods, touching certain kinds of animals, and coming in contact with bodily fluids. They believed that washing before meals kept all this uncleanliness from getting inside of them.

Because of this a woman going through her monthly cycle was unclean or after going through childbirth was unclean. If you touched her you were unclean for a certain period of time.

I believe this is one reason Mary was given a place in a cattle stall to give birth to Jesus instead of a room. Why would people inside a house not give a pregnant woman priority for a bed? Because no one wanted come into contact with an unclean woman.

If you came in contact with anyone or something unclean, there were rules about how long you had to wait before you could worship in the temple or celebrate the Passover.

They wanted to acknowledge God, so they purified themselves with an elaborate hand washing.

The way this ritual was carried out was by a person taking a pitcher of water and pouring it over one hand and then the other and then lifting up both hands and saying, "Blessed are you, O Lord, our God, King of the Universe, who has sanctified us through your commandments and has commanded us concerning the washing of hands."

This was a very rigid Jewish requirement. Not to do this was failing to follow one of the religious rituals practiced since the time of Moses.

([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Handwashing\\_in\\_Judaism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Handwashing_in_Judaism))

The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were shocked when Jesus did not require his disciples to follow this long held Jewish tradition.

So, they came to him and wanted to know why his disciples broke the long-standing tradition of the elders and did not wash their hands before they ate.

The response is a typical Jesus response. He responded with a question.

<sup>3-9</sup> *“Why do you use your rules to play fast and loose with God’s commands? God clearly says, ‘Respect your father and mother,’ and, ‘Anyone denouncing father or mother should be killed.’ But you weasel around that by saying, ‘Whoever wants to, can say to father and mother, What I owed to you I’ve given to God.’ That can hardly be called respecting a parent. You cancel God’s command by your rules. Frauds! Isaiah’s prophecy of you hit the bull’s-eye:*

*These people make a big show of saying the right thing, but their heart isn’t in it. They act like they’re worshiping me, but they don’t mean it. They just use me as a cover for teaching whatever suits their fancy.”*

<sup>10-11</sup> *He then called the crowd together and said, “Listen, and take this to heart. It’s not what you swallow that pollutes your life, but what you vomit up.”*

<sup>12</sup> *Later his disciples came and told him, “Did you know how upset the Pharisees were when they heard what you said?”*

<sup>13-14</sup> *Jesus shrugged it off. “Every tree that wasn’t planted by my Father in heaven will be pulled up by its roots. Forget them. They are blind men leading blind men. When a blind man leads a blind man, they both end up in the ditch.”*

<sup>15</sup> *Peter said, “I don’t get it. Put it in plain language.”*

<sup>16-20</sup> *Jesus replied, “You, too? Are you being willfully stupid? Don’t you know that anything that is swallowed works its way through the intestines and is finally defecated? But what comes out of the mouth gets its start in the heart. It’s from the heart that we vomit up evil arguments, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, lies, and cussing. That’s what pollutes. Eating or not eating certain foods, washing or not washing your hands—that’s neither here nor there.” (The Message Bible)*

This isn’t about biology, although Jesus goes there to make his point because Peter asks for it.

Jesus says that his Jewish friends actually have things backwards. It is not what goes in our mouths that makes us unclean, but it is what comes out of our hearts.

So, when Jesus says, “Blessed are the pure in Spirit, for they shall see God,” Jesus is saying in just a few words what he said to these Pharisees and teachers of the law.

The Greek word for pure is “catharos.” It means “to be cleansed, to be cleaned out.” We get our words like “catheter” and “catharsis” from this word.

There were hundreds of rules in the Old Testament about what you could and could not eat and about how you had to wash in order to present yourself as a clean person before God.

But here, in one verse Jesus is saying, “Purity is not about what you put in your mouth that goes through your intestines and then to the outhouse.” To put it in modern language he is saying, “Purity is about having God do a catheterization of your heart.”

When God goes into our hearts, God wants to purge our hearts of evil thoughts, motives, hate, images, and desires so that the love of God will flow unimpeded.

A Buddhist teacher and his student are walking through the woods one day, and they come upon a river and must cross. On the same side is a woman who cannot get across, although she wants to very badly. So the teacher picks her up, carries her across, and puts her down. The teacher and the student go on for miles, in what seems like hours of mental and even spiritual anguish to the student. Finally, the student stops the teacher and says to him, “I can’t stand this any longer. I have to ask: back at the river, you picked up that woman, yet we are forbidden to touch women.” The teacher looks kindly at his student and says, “Yes, I helped her, picked her up and I carried her across, and I put her down. You, on the other hand, are still carrying her.” ([http://www.firstpresithaca.org/joomla/index.php?option=com\\_preachit&id=110:those-who-are-pure&view=text&Itemid=0](http://www.firstpresithaca.org/joomla/index.php?option=com_preachit&id=110:those-who-are-pure&view=text&Itemid=0), Those Who Are Pure - Text, [www.firstpresithaca.org](http://www.firstpresithaca.org), Isaiah 43:16-21 & Matthew 5:8)

The worship God wants isn’t about religious ritual unless our rituals lead to sincerity of faith. The worship of God is about purifying the heart. That is one of the reasons we are here. We come here to have our hearts catheterized. We must give the Holy Spirit permission to do surgery.

When given this kind of freedom, there is nothing in our lives that is off limits, nothing that we do not allow the Lord access to; nothing that we do not allow the Lord Jesus to speak to, challenge, strengthen, question, or remove.

When a doctor does a heart catheterization, if he or she finds a blockage, it is removed and a stent is inserted so the vein can be opened and the blood can flow freely again. This keeps the heart from having an attack and stopping.

Confession removes the blockage of sin. Repentance is the stent that helps keep our hearts open to the will of God. The Lord is the Great Physician who facilitates this process.

Do not make the mistake of thinking that you can purify your own heart. No one does his or her own heart catheterization. Only the Great Physician can purge your heart.

The question is, “What are you carrying around in your heart that should have been left way back at the last river crossing?”

Church attendance will not get rid of it. That’s a church ritual for many. Who you voted for in the last election will not get rid of it. That’s a patriotic ritual. Saying prayers before meal time

will not get rid of it. That's a mealtime ritual. You can go through a ritual and have a dirty heart.

The Jewish people washed all the time. They had clean hands and they thought this meant they were clean spiritually but that was far from the truth.

King David understood this. When sin was heavy upon his life he knew that he needed more than a ritual to clean him of his guilt and he cried out to God:

*<sup>7</sup> Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. <sup>8</sup> Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice. <sup>9</sup> Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. <sup>10</sup> Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. <sup>11</sup> Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. <sup>12</sup> Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.*

If your worship is to be more than just a ritual, then you need to allow the Holy Spirit the freedom to move inside your life. You need to allow God to clean your heart.

We need to move from ritual to allowing God to purify our hearts. One way that we do that is through confession.

So, will you join me now in a prayer of confession?

Leader: Lord, we have betrayed You by clogging our hearts with impure thoughts, images, and desires, some of which we have acted on, hurting others, ourselves, and You.

All: We have denied you by refusing to follow Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount.

Leader: We have allowed unconfessed sin to linger in our hearts like leaves in the gutter.

All: Lord, purge our hearts today of unconfessed sin. Silently, we confess our sins to you now, asking forgiveness. Clean our hearts and release us from the bondage these sins have over us.

Silence:

Leader: Hear these confessions, Lord. Honor your promise to forgive our sins as we desire to see You work in and through our lives. Live in us day by day. Now we pray the prayer our Heavenly Father taught us to pray:

Our Father, which art in heaven,  
Hallowed be thy Name.  
Thy Kingdom come.  
Thy will be done in earth,  
As it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our trespasses,

As we forgive them that trespass against us.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
But deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom,  
The power, and the glory,  
For ever and ever.

Amen.

(Taken from the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, 1662)

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