

**“Beatitudes: The Merciful and the Pure in Heart”**

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Matthew 5:7-8 blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

If it were up to me I would have flip flopped 7 and 8. I would have put 8 before verse 7 so [it would read:] “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” Then, [I would] add: “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy,” because until your heart is right, it is very hard to be merciful.

But “pure in heart” gets a bad rap, because we think of being pure as “purity,” of being a perfectionist. That is what comes to mind, and that is not what it means at all. Being pure does not mean being perfect; being pure is an issue of the heart. And for Jesus, the heart is everything.

In one’s inner life we are called to “nurture” - to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ. The spiritual life is a daily, ongoing exercise of our hearts.

Now the way we do that can be through meditation, reading Scripture, reading *my* daily devotions on the web site [laughter] and worship. Those are just some of the ways that you develop your inner life. But most of you know a great deal about reading your Scripture, and the daily devotions, and the worship.

So I want to focus today on the other one that I mentioned - that it may be important to hear a little bit more about meditation. Now the prolific writer and Roman Catholic Priest who I dearly respect and love is Thomas Merton. Shortly before he died, Thomas Merton said, “Buddhist searchings can help all of us become better Christians.” To learn how to meditate is not something most Christians are comfortable with. We can learn from our Buddhist brethren how to do that. Two of my favorite Buddhist teachers are Pema Chodron and Thich Nhat Hanh. I would like to tell you just a little bit about them, so you can begin to understand how to think with that meditative spirit that the Buddhists have shown so well.

Now, here is Pema Chodron, a woman - very unusual within Buddhism of that time. She is an amazing American Buddhist Nun who suggests we need not flee from fear, aggression, or negative emotions - but to notice them, to even focus on them. Because if you just ignore them, you never learn how to overcome them. We need to slow down enough to become very intimate with how we feel when we are being pushed to our limit. And [like] most Americans, we do everything we can to ignore those things; we use entertainment, we use alcohol, we use anything to avoid [fear] - when her understanding is, the more we meditate on it, the more we take its power away from us. She teaches that quiet meditation and steady, compassionate abiding can help us become calm and peaceful people. It will help us become gentler toward ourselves and others.

Now notice it isn’t just [that you have to be] gentler toward other people. You have to be gentler towards yourself before you can be gentle or merciful to someone else. We Christians are awfully good at trying to be caring to everyone else while we beat ourselves

to death emotionally. That's not what the Buddhist teach; and that's not what Jesus teaches either, by the way. We have a responsibility to care for ourselves and only then do we have something to hand off and to give to someone else.

Now my other wonderful and probably my greatest [Buddhist author] - I just love Thich Nhat Hanh, I'm a fan of Thich Nhat Hanh. He is a Vietnamese monk and was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. That is how powerful and influential Thich Nhat Hanh has been, since the early 1960s - in peace and compassion movements throughout this country.

He believes and invites us to practice conscious awareness of the present moment. We are constantly thinking ahead of ourselves, going the next mile, thinking about what is going to happen. We spend our whole lives thinking about "what will" and never experiencing "what is" happening to us right now. To be mindfully alert about the ordinary details of our day to day lives, he calls us to "look deeply within ourselves." Again, not ignoring, not pretending, but being "fully in the moment" deep within ourselves. To see the roots of our behavior; to be aware of our tendencies and try to move steadily toward peace, compassion and the simple joys in life.

We have missed that so much, and it has created an environment where people don't want to be Christian because we are too high strung, we are too negative, we are too busy striving and not enjoying the life that God has given us. We need to listen and reflect, to slow down and be present in the moment, so that people who are looking at us can say, "That's the kind of life I want." Right now, too often - and I'm included - people say, "I don't want that life, he is too high strung. He is too wound up. He isn't having any fun." To get that back means to live in the moment and enjoy it. To be "pure in heart" is found in using your inner peace to bring an outer sense of mercy. You won't have anything to give until you work with *your* heart first. When that is filled, then you have something to reach out and give to others.

Now I can talk all day, until I'm blue in the face, but I would rather show you what I'm trying to talk about. This video clip is from a Danish TV show and it is just marvelous.

(He now shows the clip from the show.)

The following words are from the clip, from Denmark, about [how] we humans love to put ourselves and others into boxes we can control:

*At first, the individuals, as they come out and walk across a stage that has squares marked off as boxes, even look scared of each other. They look very different from one another, but when they move beyond the surface, they have so much more in common.*

*A man is speaking, saying, "It is easy to put people in boxes - there is us and there is them; the higher and the ones just getting by, those we trust and those we try to avoid. There are the new days and the ones who have always been here, those in the country side and those who have never seen a cow. The religious and the self-confident. There are those who we share something with and those we don't share anything with. Welcome. I am going to ask you some questions today; some of them might be a bit personal but I hope you will answer them honestly."*

*“Who in this room was the class clown?” A few stepped out of their box.*

*“Who are stepparents?” A few more stepped out of their boxes.*

*“And suddenly there are us who believe life after death, we who have seen UFOs and all of us who love to dance. We who have been bullied [a few step forward], we who have bullied others. And those who are broken-hearted. We who are madly in love. We who feel lonely. We who are bi-sexual, [one steps forward]. And we who have found the meaning of life and we who have saved lives. And then there is all of us who just loved their mark”.*

*“So maybe there is more that brings us together than we think.”*

At the end of the clip, Scott says “I just love that video, because it breaks down the boxes that we human beings tend to create, in order to gain control. But if we are living so fast and so furious, we don’t see the boxes we put ourselves in and that we have allowed other people to box us in. We don’t recognize it. That is what God is calling us to do: To be pure in heart is to see what is around us and break down those boxes, so that we can be merciful. But to do that, we have to live with empathy - to live in someone else’s shoes. That is why it was so cool when you named other boxes - and they couldn’t stand the ones they [the others] were in - and they realized the sense of commonality.

At first the individuals in their different boxes even looked scared to look at each other. They looked very different from one another - from box to box. But when they moved beyond the surface, they realized they had so much more in common. They could even embrace their differences when they knew there is at least some commonality between them. They might have nurses’ outfits on, one man had muscles (that was almost scary); but some were stepparents - they had that bond. They had to look, listen and try to recognize commonality. When we are merciful to ourselves, then we are able to show mercy to others.

Our Buddhist brother and sister have taught us that if we do not know ourselves, how can we recognize the similarities in other people? We can learn that from them. And if we cannot love ourselves, how can we love others, or expect God to love us? It begins with us, not in a narcissistic way, but in a means of understanding and appreciating ourselves so that we have something to give lovingly to someone else.

Again, my good friend who I have never met, Thomas Merton, “I find I have a lot of good friends because I read their work. Thomas Merton defined God as “mercy within mercy, within mercy, within mercy.” God is mercy. You find God in being pure in heart so that you can have the something to give, and then you turn with a full heart and offer mercy. There is where you find God.

Learn from our Danish friends, and show acceptance and love. Then you will have that purity of heart, and you will find the mercy that God is offering you. Do that by meditation that can help us to love ourselves and others. You don’t have to do this for hours to receive something from it. Take 5 or 10 minutes. Just sit silently and listen for God, and you will be amazed at what you will begin to hear and see and understand about yourself and about God speaking to you.

That creates that purity of heart and allows us to show mercy to ourselves and others. When we do that we truly live the Beatitudes and honor God now and always. Amen