

A Pure Heart and Sincere Love

1 Peter 1:13-25

John Breon

James Bryan Smith is a United Methodist pastor and a professor at Friends University in Kansas. He tells about being the guest preacher at a church where he had preached five years before. His message the second time was similar to the one he gave earlier. He hoped the congregation might have temporary memory loss. He preached about how God loves us without condition; Jesus died for all our sins; God has reconciled us to himself and in Christ we are new creations.

After the service, a man went up to Jim, looked at him and held out an electronic device without saying a word. Jim looked at it and saw on it a recording of the sermon he had given there five years ago. He assumed the man was going to make fun of him for preaching essentially the same sermon. He said, "I apologize for preaching such a similar sermon—but you have to understand, I only have one sermon, I suppose." Then he noticed a tear running down the man's cheek.

The man told Jim, "I didn't come to tease you about your sermon being the same, but to thank you. When I heard this message five years ago it changed my life. I grew up in a highly legalistic church, and every week I heard about how God was mad at me, and how I was not good enough. I lived every day in fear of God, and I didn't love God at all. Your sermon melted my heart. I downloaded it and have listened to it dozens of times. I've given it to just about everyone I know. I'm a police officer, so I'm not used to being so emotional. I just wanted to thank you for this message."

Of course, Jim was very moved by this and thanked God for using him to make a difference. Then he noticed a young woman waiting to speak with him. He introduced himself to her. She said, "Thank you so much for that sermon. It was very freeing!" Jim was really glowing, but then she went on, "I've been living with my boyfriend for the past six months, and I was raised in a church that said this was a sin, and I felt really guilty. But this morning you said that God loves us without condition, and that Jesus has forgiven all of our sins, and then I realized that my guilt was unnecessary."

Jesus paid it all! So I just wanted to thank you for such a liberating message.”

Jim’s heart sank and he realized that simply proclaiming the good news that God loves us no matter what is not the whole story. He later had the opportunity to talk to the young woman also about God’s holiness and purity (*The Good and Beautiful God* 113-15).

The Bible tells us that God is love and also that God is holy. It doesn’t say that God is holiness in the same way it says that God is love. Love is God’s nature. All of God’s other qualities and powers express or manifest God’s love (Hal Knight, “A Theology of Love,” www.catalystresources.org/a-theology-of-love, accessed 5/7/14).

In the first part of this chapter, Peter speaks about the salvation God gives that makes us live in hope and fills us with inexpressible and glorious joy. Now he moves into talking about how we live out this salvation, hope, and joy. Verse 13 begins with “therefore.” He is showing us how to put it into practice.

Near the end of the section we’re reading today, he says, “Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart” (or, “from a pure heart”) (v. 22). God’s people imitate God in being pure, holy and loving. As God’s nature is holy love, God’s people are to be characterized by holy love.

Smith quotes Scottish preacher George MacDonald: “love loves unto purity.” Preaching on Hebrews 12:29, “Our God is a consuming fire,” MacDonald merged the concepts of unconditional and unending love with holiness. God loves us so much that he longs for us to be pure and God works to make us pure. “He is always against sin; in so far as, and while, they and sin are one, he is against them—against their desires, their aims, their fears, and their hopes; and thus he is altogether *for them*” (*The Good and Beautiful God* 123).

The call to holy love is based on who God is and what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Holy love leads to a certain way of living that manifests holy love.

Notice how Peter describes God as he makes the call to holiness. "The one who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do." Then he quotes Leviticus where God says, "Be holy, because I am holy." God intends his people to reflect his character. To be holy is to be different or set apart. God is holy because God is the one true and living God. God is unique. There is no one like him. Because God is holy, God's people are to be holy. That was true in ancient Israel and it continues to be true in the Church. God's people are set apart, different from the world around us that lives without reference to God. We are consecrated for God's service.

Peter says that we call on a Father—God. He also talks about our new birth and our being obedience children. We are God's children who are called to live a new way. As children of God, we need to show some family resemblance. When children are young, we like to see which parent they look most like, which side of the family is most reflected in them. As we get older, we realize that we not only look like our parents, but we act like them in some ways also. Can we begin to bear a resemblance to God, our heavenly Parent?

The Father we call on is also the One who judges each person's work impartially. God is not our buddy. God is a judge. God will hold us accountable in eternity for what we do with this life. God judges impartially. God doesn't play favorites. His judgment is always just and right and good. Being impartial and not showing favoritism is another way we are called to be like God.

So, purity of heart, or holiness, and sincere love are rooted in who God is, God's character and nature. They also flow from what God has done for us in Jesus. Peter wants us to remember the cost of our salvation. We were redeemed, ransomed, set free from the power of sin and death, from an empty way of life. It wasn't something perishable or temporary that brought our redemption. Instead, it was the precious blood of Christ. Jesus is the flawless Lamb of God who takes our sin into himself and dies in our place. His blood, his giving himself, protects us like that of the Passover lamb; it pardons us like the blood of the sin offerings; and it purifies us like the blood sprinkled in the temple and on the people in the old covenant.

Jesus fulfills all that and makes it happen for us based on his once and for all sacrifice of himself.

Not only are we redeemed by the imperishable blood of Christ, we are born again by the imperishable seed of God, which is God's word. God's living and enduring word comes to us through the gospel. It's the truth we obey and so we are purified.

So a pure heart comes from being forgiven and cleansed by the death of Jesus for us. And it comes from being born anew through the living word of God at work in us.

What is our heart? That's a figure of speech for the essence of who we are. The heart is the executive center of a person. It's where thinking and feeling and decision-making come together and happen. Because of sin, human hearts are deceitful and far from God. Jesus said, "It is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person" (Mark 7:21-23).

But our hearts can be cleansed and purified, filled with God's Spirit, with love, joy and hope. Jesus also said, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8). A pure heart is one that has a single focus and intention. We are single-minded in our commitment to God and wholehearted in our devotion to God. A pure heart is so filled with God's presence and love that sin is crowded out. Are we there yet?

Bob Benson writes about struggling with Jesus' saying, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." He says he always took that phrase to mean that at some time in judgment some minor official would open our heart, look in and say, "You're not pure so you can't see God." Then Bob started putting Jesus' saying together with something Paul writes in Colossians: "In Christ you have been brought to completion" (2:10).

Here I am wanting to see God. Here I am without a pure heart. Here is the verse which says, "In Him I have been brought to completion." I'm looking for a way to put these three things together.

"I want to see God."

"But you're not pure."

"I have to see God."

"But you have to be pure"

"I need to see God."

"But you need to be pure."

I wasn't getting anywhere starting at the front, so I went around to the back door. One day a voice within me said:

"I have seen God."

"Then you must be pure."

"I have heard his voice. I have seen His ways."

"Then you must be pure."

"In Him you have been brought to completion."

Every time you say to me that I am not complete I'm going to say, "I agree, but...He said I was." (*Something's Going on Here* 167-68)

James Smith tells about a nineteenth-century Russian Orthodox priest named John of Kronstadt. He served at a time when alcohol abuse was rampant. Priests didn't venture out of their churches to help people; they waited for the people to come to them. But John, compelled by love, went out into the streets. He would lift the hungover, foul-smelling people from the gutter, cradle them in his arms and say to them, "This is beneath your dignity. You were meant to house the fullness of God." That's a great truth about every one of us. Knowing that we are meant to house the fullness of God is a key to living a life of holiness (*The Good and Beautiful God* 162).

A heart purified, transformed, filled with all the fullness of God produces a transformed life, new behavior, love. Peter says we live out our new identity, our salvation and hope by preparing our minds, being self-controlled and setting our hope on grace (13).

Prepare your mind is literally, "gird up the loins of your mind." The image is of a Middle Eastern man with a long flowing robe. When he had to work or run or go to war, he would tuck his robe up in his belt, cinch it up or gird it to allow for freedom of movement. We bring under control "all loose-flowing thoughts" that might trip us up or slow us down in our walk with God (Robert Mounce, *A Living Hope*). A life of holy love involves our

thinking. Christians are called to think clearly, to love God with our minds, to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. Let's apply our best thinking to our way of life in Christ.

The phrase "fully sober" means to be self-controlled or well-balanced. It relates to clear thinking and good judgment. We need to be alert, on guard against whatever evil would try to turn us from God.

Our hope, as we saw last week, is in God and from God. Here, we are to set our hope on the grace that will be given to us. Grace, God's powerful love and favor, flow to us now. When Jesus appears in his glorious return, we will know grace like we never have before.

When our hearts are pure, we have sincere love for each other. This is love that is genuine, there's no hypocrisy about it. The word for love here is *philadelphia*, "love of the brothers," "brotherly love," mutual love. In Christ, God is our Father, we are born anew as children of God. We are members together of God's family. We are brothers and sisters in Christ. The Bible says over and over that we are to love one another. And this is not mushy or sentimental love. This is God's kind of love. We love each other with the holy love, the sacrificial love, the transforming love that God has for us.

As we grow in holiness, we grow in love. Sometimes it seems like we have a long way to go to love God's way. But God keeps working on us and in us and through us. We're learning to love even as we learn what it means to be holy and have a pure heart.

Rich Mullins wrote a great prayer song that says in one verse:

You who live in radiance
hear the prayers of those of us who live in skin.
We have a love that's not as patient as yours was,
still we do love now and then.

("Hard to Get," on *The Jesus Record*)

Loving each other from a pure heart means caring and showing that we care in many ways. When Fred Craddock was teaching in a seminary, one Sunday he had an afternoon engagement and had to leave quickly after church. He took a short cut through the choir room to the back of the

church. He said to one of the women in the choir as she was putting up her robe, "I appreciated the anthem this morning."

She said, "I hope so, because that's it."

"What do you mean?"

"That's it. I'm hanging it up." She was putting away her robe.

He asked, "Are you retiring?" She'd been in the choir 103 or 104 years; he thought she was retiring.

"No, I'm quitting."

"You're quitting?"

"I'm quitting."

"Oh, you're not quitting?"

"I'm quitting."

"Why?"

"I sat up there in the choir loft this morning and looked around at the other choir members. I looked at the pastor and looked at the worship leader. I looked at the ushers and just looked out over the congregation. I finally said to myself what has haunted me for years."

"What's that?"

"Who cares?"

Fred was in a hurry. He had to go make a speech, so he said, "Oh, you'll be all right. Take an aspirin." He went to the parking lot, but all the way to the speaking engagement and all the way back he thought of her indictment. He was a member of that church and she was indicting him and all the members. If what she said was true, what she was really saying was, "This is not a church." "If her opinion after longtime membership there, as an active participant in that church, was that the sum gesture of the church was a shrug of the shoulders, then it was not a church."

When he got home, he called that lady and said, "I want to talk to you."

"If you want to."

So he went to her house, and they brusquely disagreed. He finally asked, "What would we have to do to show that we cared?"

She said, "Take me seriously." This was kind of a strange way to put it, because she was sort of comic, always playing practical jokes. She would

pin tails of choir robes together. She would go early and put some big cartoon on the pulpit so when the pastor came out solemnly, he'd look down and be blown out of the water. Fred said, "You can't be serious! Take you seriously? What are you talking about? You're always joking and laughing."

She said, "You bought all that? I thought it was rather transparent. I like to be taken seriously."

As he left, he said, "You're wrong, you're wrong."

She said, "I'm not."

He said, "I get to travel to churches all over the country, and everywhere I go there are people who care for each other. They take care of each other."

"Where?"

"Everywhere I go, there are people who care."

"Really?"

"Yes."

She said, "Name some."

And Fred concludes, "She wants names. May I use your name? May I give her your name?" (*Craddock Stories* 58-60)

"Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from a pure heart."