

October 19, 2014

The National Presbyterian Church

The Beatitudes – Inside Out

Psalm 139:1-6, 13-14, 23-24; Luke 19:1-10

Dr. David Renwick

In our sermons this fall we are looking together at the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ in what we call the Sermon on the Mount, three chapters (5, 6, 7) in the gospel according to Saint Matthew, the story of Jesus as we find it in Matthew's account, three Chapters which begin with eight statements – statements about blessedness or happiness that we call the Beatitudes. These statements function like a preface, as if Jesus is saying to us (and those who heard him), "My teaching is the source of your happiness. Not a transitory happiness, not an ephemeral passing happiness but the kind of happiness which makes your life solid as a rock." And at the very end of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:24-28) Jesus says more or less this: I want your life to be rock solid. If you listen to what I say and if you follow what I tell you to do, your life will be like a house which is built not on sand but on rock. And when the storms come (as they shall) when the rain falls (as it will) and when the floods rise, your house (that is, your life) will stand. This is what I want for you. Not a promise of a life of ease, but a life that is rock solid in a shaky world. A happiness which nothing can shake or take away.

So Jesus speaks about this happiness – but he does so in terms which are highly unusual. The places where Jesus says we are to find our happiness are not the usual places in which our society says happiness is to be found. He begins like this:

- Happy are the poor in spirit. How strange is that? Poor in spirit? Well, poor enough in spirit to know our absolute dependence on God. That's I think what Jesus has in mind here. We begin with that dependence: "I cannot live life without you." But you've got to be poor in spirit before you get there.
- Happy are those who mourn – for the world is not as it ought to be; nor are our lives. We need to grieve over evil. We need to grieve over sin, over our choices which have separated us from God.
- Happy are the meek. Those who don't force their way in life but to trust in the sovereign purpose and plan and power of God at work. Happy are the meek, not weak: people who don't force their way in life.
- Happy are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for right-relatedness to God and right-relatedness to others. Hunger and thirst for this more than for every other appetite; for all other hungerings and thirstings.
- Happy are the merciful says Jesus.
- Happy are the peacemakers.
- Happy even are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake.

And then today's Beatitude or statement of happiness: *Happy are the pure in heart for they shall see God.*

Now I suppose, right from the outset, we might understand Jesus to be saying something like this – that if our lives are morally perfect; if our lives are religiously perfect; if they are absolutely pure; if all sin has been removed; if all contamination from sin (like cleaning up a hazardous garbage dump) has gone – and we become pure in a moral sense, then our lives will become pleasing to God. Indeed, we will have an experience of God, a sense of God's presence in a new and intimate way, an experience that we have never had before. And we will, as a consequence, become happy.

Now there is no doubt to me that, at least partially, Jesus has this understanding in mind: that we need to live lives that are morally and religiously pure.

The scriptures repeatedly tell us that our sin, our choices based often on ourselves and not on the will of God, create a barrier between us and God, a distance between us and God, so that our vision of God becomes blurred – and we blame God for all kinds of things which aren't God's fault, but ours. We don't see God as God really is. Our sight becomes confused because of our sin, because of our choices. Only those with "clean hands and a pure heart" says the Psalmist (Psalm 24) can approach the presence of God; and the Prophet Habakkuk (1:13) says very clearly that God is so pure so that he cannot behold evil, and live with that evil, without calling forth a repentance in life which will move us out of whatever evil has taken hold of us. So that in part, at least, in calling us to purity of heart, Jesus is surely calling us to moral purity, and to religious purity; he is calling us to clean up our act! He is calling us to repent, to change our lives.

And this is a message that all of us need to hear, not just one or two of us, but all of us need to hear this constantly: that our lives are not where they ought to be, and if we want to see God clearly then we need to change and keep on changing as long as there is breath within us; to live lives that are closer to the standard that Jesus sets for us. I have no doubt in my mind that this is (in part at least) what Jesus is speaking about when he says "*Happy are the pure in heart for they shall see God.*" It's part; but it's only part of what Jesus has in mind – and it's not the part that I really want to focus on this morning as we think about this phrase together!

What I have in mind, and what I think Jesus also has in mind, is a different way of thinking both about purity and the heart, and, indeed, a different way of wording the actual phrase itself. That is, in the original Greek, there is no preposition "in"! "In" is not "in there" next to "heart"! It is assumed (and that's okay linguistically); but literally the phrase in the New Testament does not say "in" heart, but "Happy are the pure 'to the' heart" – and that's the way I want to think about this phrase this morning. That's the way in fact the great theologian of the Reformation, John Calvin, thought about this phrase some 400 years ago: not just "pure in heart" (though that's involved) but "pure to the heart" so that what Jesus is calling us to hear is not just a challenge to moral perfection (though that's down the line), but first of all, first of all *Jesus is calling us to live a life that is transparent – that is clear, as it were, all the way to the heart*; a life that allows God to come into our lives, all the way to the heart, so that we don't stop God at a

certain point, but we say, “Here I am, my life is an open book; come on in to the very depth of my being.” and when we let God in there, ah, says Jesus, we will find a vision of God that we have never had before, and which will meet our need in such a way that we will find a happiness that nothing can take from us.

So, yes, there’s a call to perfection in heart, but it’s not perfection first. Its transparency first to the depth of our soul. “Live your life as an open book before God,” says Jesus. Not necessarily first of all without sin (that’s a life-long struggle), but without guile, without deceit, without pretending, without hypocrisy. An openness so that the truth is exposed about your life, and so that God can come into the core of your being. *Happy are the pure in heart*, but also, *Happy are the pure to the heart*, to the core of our being.

Some of you may know that at the end of the book of Revelation there is a picture of the Holy City Jerusalem coming down out of Heaven from God; and there is a stream, a river flowing through the city, and it is described (Rev. 22:1) as “clear as crystal,” or pure as crystal: well, it’s the same word as in the Beatitude – pure, transparent, you can see straight through it. This is what Jesus is calling for us to do: Stop covering up. Stop pretending. Stop denying the truth about yourself. Especially, especially to God. Let him in to the very core of your being.

This is teaching which Jesus shares elsewhere, by the way, in the gospels, and even in the rest of the Sermon on the Mount itself: this call to transparency before God; this sense that God is interested not just in the superficial outside part of our life but in the inside of our life as well.

- So, for example, when Jesus speaks about adultery as he does in the Sermon on the Mount (5:27-30), he says that it’s not just adultery that concerns God, but purity of thought; It’s lust that needs to be dealt with as well. The inside as well as the outside.
- When he speaks about murder as he does in the rest of the Sermon on the Mount (5:21-22) Jesus doesn’t just speak about taking somebody’s life. He speaks about anger, and dealing with the anger in our lives towards others.
- When Jesus speaks about prayer and giving generously in the Sermon on the Mount (6:1-4) as he does, he speaks not just about the outward act of being generous or the outward act of saying your prayers; he says that you’ve got to look to the inside and ask “*Who are you trying to impress? Dig deep. Open yourself up. Examine what’s going on on the inside. It’s not just the prayers I want. It’s not just your giving that I want. I want you to give to me, to pray to me, to your father who sees in secret. It’s what’s going on in secret in the depth of your being that is of interest to me.*”

We need to be pure all the way to the heart if we are going to grow, if we’re going to grow spiritually, if we are going to become (eventually) pure in the heart as well. Take the cover off. Let God in deep down to the very core of your being.

This is something which Zacchaeus did in the story that we read in Luke Chapter 19. Jesus comes to Jericho, Zacchaeus’ home town. And Zacchaeus is a tax collector. He works for the Romans occupiers. According to some people in his society, he’s a traitor to the Jewish people. He works for the invading Romans and he collects taxes for them. The instructions from the

Romans are simple: this is the amount of money we want; you take whatever you want and keep it; but just deliver our required amount to us. And so Zachaeus becomes very rich from the cream off the top, and the Romans turn a blind eye to what he does, so long as he delivers the required taxes. He becomes very rich.

He has it all. But he doesn't. On the outside he would appear to be happy. But he's not. There's something going on; there's unhappiness seeping into the inside of his life. But others wouldn't see this, and don't see this – until the day Jesus comes to town. At which point the unhappiness that's on the inside in Zacchaeus' life begins to bubble over and becomes visible. In public, Zacchaeus becomes transparent to the very core of his being, not only to Jesus but to the people around about him. In fact, in the story, he's given up pretending altogether. He's given up the façade altogether. He doesn't care anymore. He just wants his life to be sorted out.

And we see this in two phrases, two words that we sometimes rush over, in part because many of us hear this story as a story we learn from childhood, a story to be told to children. When Zacchaeus hears that Jesus is coming to town he wants to "see" him, (it's the same word as in the Beatitudes: the pure to the heart will "see" God). He wants to see who Jesus is and he runs. And then he climbs a sycamore tree. So if you're telling this to children this is great. He runs like children run, climbs a tree like children climb a tree . . . but in the Middle East you don't run. You don't run! It's beneath your dignity. You don't do this. And as an adult, anywhere, you don't climb trees.

Let's assume, for example, that the President is passing by on Nebraska, and I immediately leave you and I run out to see him. You may say that's a little strange. But then I climb one of the trees out there, you would all say that I'd lost it! This is weird! What in the world is going on in him?

Now that's exactly what the crowd would have said to Zacchaeus: How strange is this? But he doesn't care. He doesn't care what they think. He doesn't care what they say. He allows them to see that something is going on on the inside that is different. His actions give the game away, but Zacchaeus no longer cares if people know it; he's not hiding any more. He is so desperate for something to come into his life that will give him an ounce of happiness in the inner core of his being that he's willing to be an open book. Exposed.

And at that moment, up the tree, if you remember the story, Jesus looks up and sees him. Zacchaeus *sees Jesus* (as he wanted to do), and not only that, but Jesus stops and *sees him*: Jesus sees this man who no longer pretends, no longer is concerned about appearance but exposes his inner emptiness, his weakness to the crowd and to Jesus himself; and Jesus loves him anyway! *Happy are those who are not only pure in heart but pure to the core of their being – Transparent to the core of their being; stopped pretending that they are someone they are not.*

But this is hard. This is hard. There is always a sense in which we must cover up who we are. We don't want everybody spilling the beans all the time. TMI: too much information! So it gets a little bit complicated to know exactly how and when we are to be honest and exposed before others. But we all know that there are times when we could be more honest than we are, and that we have learned to put on a façade, a persona, which we use on various occasions that is not us.

And there becomes this disconnect in our lives between the “real us”, and what other people see. Sometimes this becomes so well practiced that we can’t get out of it; at least not easily. Sometimes it becomes so well practiced that in fact that persona really, in a sense, becomes everything in our lives; far more important to us than letting any glimpse of the truth get out.

This was the case with a friend I had (in fact, the best friend I had) the first year I came to this country at college. I discovered a year later that my best friend was a pathological liar who was pretending to be somebody he was not. Some of you know stories about these people (for example, pretending to be surgeons! They do well, are often brilliant, but have no training!). Well I lived with a person like this for a year.

[As an aside, you feel rather foolish when you find out in the end that this person is living a lie, that his name is not his real name, where he comes from is not really where he comes from. He’s pretending in all kinds of ways. I felt foolish until I found out that he had actually fooled the whole college where I was, that they had it wrong as well.]

It was only discovered that he was living a lie when a professor followed up on something that didn’t quite make sense. So here is this veneer and he spends his life polishing this veneer, and then there’s this tiny little crack and the professor walks through the crack, and as he does so, he gets to the core of my friend Bennett’s being, and realizes that everything on the outside is false and phony. And once the façade began to crumble the whole story began to crumble. He was expelled from the school. I found out a year later. But years later checked him out on the Internet and discovered he’s back to his same old tricks. He simply does not want to be the person he really is, so passionate to be somebody else that he’ll try to pull the wool over anybody’s eyes.

I know the story is unusual and extreme, but I think it still illustrates what we may all be tempted to do at some time or another, to some extent, in our lives. And all the more so, not just because we feel we must, but because we live in a society which focuses so much on the outside, so much on image, so much on appearance, and seems to reward that approach to life as well.

So we find in his best-selling book *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Steven Covey speaking about this as he examines literature on business success from the founding of our nation to the time he wrote his book about 20 years ago or so. He says that when he began to survey business literature written in the United States, he found a disjuncture, a change in the nature of the literature after World War II compared to before World War II.

After World War II, he says, things began to focus on image, on appearance, skills, techniques and strategies (“You’ve got to do this, you got to do that and if you do these particular things you will be successful.”) On the other hand, he says, before World War II it was different. He says that success was connected with “being,” with who you were. It had to do with the virtues that nobody sees but God. Virtues which if you dig down deep are there or not there: humility, fidelity, temperance, courage, patience, modesty, integrity.

And Covey's whole thesis is that this difference is a game changer: success, he says, comes from trust, and you can't build trust just on strategy; trust between people is based on consistency of character over the long haul; on virtue in the very depth of being. For the short term, yes, there can be success, a flash in the pan; but for the long term people will see the disjuncture between the deeds and the person, so that in the long term, if you are not transparent to the very core of your being, your plans for success will not work. You will not get the happiness you want. You will not get the success you want. You will not see the transformation in your business life or your personal life that you want.

Transformation is the issue in another area of life as well. Transformation is the "business" of an organization which is well known to all of us – the organization Alcoholics Anonymous. Alcoholics Anonymous is not interested merely in the theory of alcoholism; not merely in analyzing what it is to be an alcoholic, or what causes addiction, or even what will solve the problem as a whole. No! Alcoholics Anonymous is in the business of actually transforming lives. And if lives are to be transformed, if they are to be set at liberty, brought out of a kind of bondage which leads to all kinds of deceit and playing of games with other people's lives, then, what they have discovered is that there must be brutal honesty all the way to the very core of a person's being. But, what they also know is this: that there is something in our being which even if we get to the place where we expose and can be honest about the truth, we will all too easily want to close the door quickly, and stop getting to that point again. So in AA meetings brutal honesty is essential, repeatedly, weekly, and sometimes daily.

So, for example, if you're going to speak at an AA meeting, you'll need to say, "My name is [David] and I am . . . an alcoholic!" There. Spill the beans. Be transparent to the very core of your being. And that is a step, a critical step, not the only step, but a critical step to actual transformation – from pure to the heart, crystal clear (morally open, exposed, transparent), all the way through to the core of being, to pure in heart (morally different). Transformation of life follows thereafter. Power comes by being honest to the core.

That power was exactly what Zacchaeus experienced on that day when he, perhaps against his better judgment, maybe not even knowing what he was doing, was pure to the heart, running, climbing a tree! As if to say, I don't care anymore what people think. And it was when he did that – ran and climbed the tree – that he saw Jesus; and he not only saw Jesus, but he saw Jesus as he had never seen Jesus before . . . one who knew him fully, and loved him passionately.

What a risk it was. But he took it. Exposed before Jesus and others – risking the possibility that "righteous Jesus" would blame him for all he'd done. He risked being not only called down, but put down by Jesus when Jesus saw him. He risked not even seeing or being seen at all. But what happened was this: he discovered a Savior who noticed him and who did not put him down, but who called him down from the tree only to lift him up by grace forever. His life was transformed. "I just want to stay with you a while, that's all," said Jesus. And in those simple words Zacchaeus found the power of transformation having exposed his life to Jesus, having been loved by Jesus. He now becomes a person who is pure. He cares for other people in a way

he had never cared for before for honesty, for integrity and for justice in his relationships because he risked the inner core of his life to the gaze of God made known in Jesus Christ. He saw Jesus, Jesus saw him, he saw Jesus as he had never seen him before. Happiness. Sheer unadulterated, unmovable happiness replacing the unhappiness which drove him up the tree in the first place.

“O Lord,” says the Psalmist (139), *“You have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up. You discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways.”*

. . . yet we still hide. God knows us, sees us, sees straight through us. Why in the world do we hide?

Admit the truth, says Jesus. Just admit it. And you will find in that admitting, that openness, that transparency-to-the-core-of-your-being the kind of relief and release that Zacchaeus found and came to know, and that transformed his life. Pure in heart because he first became pure to the heart.

“Happy,” says Jesus, “are the pure in heart; happy are those who are first of all pure to the heart for they shall see God.”

David A. Renwick Copyright © 2014 All Rights Reserved.

To listen on line go to: <http://nationalpres.org/~natio100/sermons>
To watch full services go to: <http://www.ustream.tv/channel/nationalpres>

THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016
www.NationalPres.org 202.537.0800