

PURITY OF HEART

By

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In an interview of people in a community where the crime rate is extremely high, one blamed the government for not making jobs available, saying, "I am being forced to go into a life of crime." After the recent Los Angeles riots, involving arson, theft, and the murder of innocent people, the media repeatedly tried to remove guilt from the rioters and lay it on white "racism." Horrible crimes are often blamed on society, meaning that the criminal is not responsible for his acts.

A bitter fight is going on throughout the land over how to address the problem of teenage sex and pregnancy. The solution most often offered is to teach these children to "protect" themselves from disease and pregnancy by the use of condoms. The argument is that in today's environment children cannot be expected to abstain from sexual activity, so just furnish them with the means to do it "safely." They seem to think that sex is a recent discovery and something that is produced by the environment rather than being part of God's original design, given for man's personal control and benefit.

In the nation, which subscribes to the motto that "In God We Trust", it is of striking significance that so many people are ready to abandon the concept of self-control under God's grace and accept the evil philosophy of humanism.

At the root of God's law is the doctrine of moral responsibility, and this responsibility is not dependent upon any external force or influence but rests entirely within each individual. The great commandment, Jesus said, is this: "Thou shall love the Lord thy God with all thy soul, and with all thy mind."¹ To love God is to love all there is of God: His holiness, His purity, His purpose and His commandments. One then acts, to the best of his understanding and ability, in keeping with God's commands because this is what he loves, it is what his heart desires, what he chooses above all else.

Jesus declared, "Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God."² Being pure in heart means having one's heart fixed on one thing and aiming at one goal, as exemplified by Jesus. "My meat is to do the will of Him who sent me."³ "I do always the things that are pleasing to Him."⁴ What mattered to Jesus was doing the Father's will. His teaching and actions were highly displeasing to the most powerful men of the day, but they pleased the Father. This is purity, to have the heart set on one purpose and not adulterated by a variety of desires and goals.

The issue that Christians must settle is whether to seek what is considered success in the modern world or the approval of God. Ordinarily, if we do not attain some stature and esteem in the eyes of men, we are seen as failures. But our comparison is not to be with others and certainly not with those who are worldly successful. Jesus said, "God knows your hearts: for that which is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God."⁵ God knows whether our actions are prompted out of love for Him and His purpose or for the sake of receiving men's praise. Self-examination might reveal that sometimes our decisions and expressions are influenced more by what others may think of us than by what may please God.

Such a split purpose is defined by James as being double-minded. He writes that some failed to receive what they asked in prayer because they wanted to “spend it in your pleasures.”⁶ They sought the friendship of the world rather than that of God.⁷ James instructed them to “Draw nigh to God and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded.”⁸ There is clearly a contrast between a heart that is pure and one set on more than one goal.

Double-mindedness comes in many forms. Basically it simply means setting the mind on two opposite goals or trying to serve two masters. It describes the millions of people who on Sunday go to church and sing God’s praise, then on Monday are aligned with the world in pursuing things which are detrimental to a life of faith in Christ.

This sin is actually promoted by some popular evangelists, who teach their hearers to put their faith in Christ in order to gain health and the world’s wealth.

There is another, more subtle, form of double-mindedness. This is the attempt to do good and avoid evil solely out of the fear of punishment. There is, indeed, the certainty of judgment and the punishment of sinners, for “the wages of sin is death.”⁹ The good news of Christ is that He suffered the death penalty for believers, that we might have life with Him for eternity. Faith in this good news removes fear, for as Paul writes, “There is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus.”¹⁰ But we cannot have it both ways; that is, to believe that all sin is forgiven in Christ and still live in fear of condemnation.

To give an example, a person may give a tithe to his church, not because he loves to give or because it is an expression of his thanksgiving to God, but because he is afraid not to tithe. As Soren Kierkegaard says, “He does continually what he really would rather not do, or at least what he has no pleasure in doing.”¹¹ One may do good, not because he loved the good, but because he is afraid not to! After a seminar I had presented on the subject of the ultimate destruction of the unsaved, a woman, prominent in the church, remarked, “If I were not afraid of suffering forever for sin, I would enjoy myself the way the world does...” Apparently she loved sin but was afraid to engage in it. Even worse, her confession indicated that her goal was not to be holy and sinless, which is Christ’s desire for us,¹² but only that she might escape the fire of punishment. If we love sin but abstain from it only out of fear, isn’t this still displeasing to God? What kind of fellowship can God have with a person who obeys Him only because he is afraid not to? Isn’t this being double-minded?

James gives the solution. “Purify your hearts.” Purge out every desire and ambition that is contrary to the primary purpose of serving and pleasing the Heavenly Father. “Be afflicted, and mourn and weep,” he adds.¹³ Repentance for seeking to win the world’s esteem and engaging in the things which God condemns is not easy. It may require some traumatic changes in social life, as well as in working and family relationships. “Let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness,” writes James.¹³ Purifying the heart is not to be taken lightly. It is major surgery.

But it has its reward. James goes on to say, “Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall exalt you.”¹⁴ It is pride that keeps one from forsaking the world to follow Christ with a pure heart. He is unwilling to bear the shame of ridicule from enemies, criticism of friends, and the laughter of fools. It was after Jesus humbled himself to bear the shame of the cross that He was exalted above all.¹⁵ It is only when one is willing to humble himself, to welcome humiliation by the world in order to seek the

purpose of God, to follow the way of Christ against all the pressure to go in the opposite direction, to covet nothing of the world — neither its pleasures, its wealth nor its prestige — it is when he so humbles himself that god may then exalt him. In daily life we are under the pressure of the world as it advocates its wisdom, its progress, its wealth and its successes, urging us to conform to the crowd and join the happy throng. But at the last, we must account only to God. Others may be impressed by our appearance to the world, but God examines our hearts.¹⁶

The ultimate goal is life — life here and now as God directs, and the glorious life to come, demonstrated by the resurrection of Jesus.

What Jesus teaches us is that this life is perishing and worldly values are temporal.¹⁷ Therefore our hearts are to be fixed on the life and values which are eternal.¹⁸ To do so is to humble ourselves before God and He will accomplish His purpose, which included the resurrection to immortality and glory in the last day.

“We know that if he shall be manifested, we shall be like him; for we shall see him even as he is. And every one that has this hope set on him purifies himself, even as he is pure.”¹⁹

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