

HOMILY AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

AUGUST 7, 2022

“THE BEATITUDES, PART 6: BLESSED ARE THE PURE IN HEART---MATTHEW 5:8”

Our human race has glorious aspects to it-----think of the beautiful music, the profound poetry, the amazing art..... Many great things we have done! But we also have some flaws.

Some think there may be intelligent life on other worlds. I don't see any evidence for it, so I'm skeptical. But if it's true, and if they're fairly far advanced, the experts say they could pick up our television signals as they shoot out of our atmosphere into space beyond. Perhaps in that way, these hypothetical aliens could learn about the glories of our race....and also about our flaws.

What is the first TV signal that was strong enough that it could have made it out of our atmosphere and have been picked up by others? Historians know----it was an early broadcast in 1936 in the very early days of TV. This first strong enough signal originated in Berlin in 1936. It was the broadcast of a speech by Adolf Hitler! Imagine aliens getting their first glimpse of our world by watching the Fuhrer ranting and raving, screaming and gesturing wildly.....What an incredible first impression of humanity! I would guess the alien response would have been---“That is one flawed race!” (The Third Reich In Power, Richard J. Evans, Penguin Press, 2005, p. 311)

The aliens (if they exist!) would be right---we are badly flawed! Not just Hitler----all of us. What is our biggest flaw? Sin----and it cuts us off from a pure and holy God. For we must be pure to see God. Our Lord Jesus Christ said it very clearly in the 6th Beatitude----“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”

This summer I am doing a sermon series, going week by week through the Beatitudes as taught by our Lord in Matthew 5. Today we are up to Beatitude #6 as recorded in Matthew 5:8. To repeat the words of the Lord---“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” To see God, to draw close to God, our hearts must be pure. The psalmist in Psalm 24:4 agrees-----“Who shall stand in God's holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart.”

If our hearts and lives are pure, we will see God more and more at work around us and in our lives.

Of course, ultimately, purity of heart is a gift from God. But we do have to do our part by cooperating with God's grace, God's gift. St. Paul talks about this very specifically in Hebrews 12:14----"Strive for...the holiness without which no one will see the Lord." We have to strive for purity. God gives the grace and we need to cooperate by striving.

What are we actually striving for when we strive for purity of heart? To be freed from our sins. To be holy. Not just forgiven of sin, but for freedom from sin.

We Orthodox believe differently about this than many other Christians---not all other Christians, but many. An example of a viewpoint that is different than ours is the beliefs of the first Protestant, Martin Luther, back in the 1500s. Luther was a very outspoken fellow! So I will tone his language down just a little to be appropriate in mixed company in church!

Luther had a quite pessimistic view of the possibility of achieving real holiness in this life. He had a very negative view of the moral state of people and described us as a pile of cow manure. (Actually he didn't use the German word for manure, but the German equivalent of a 4-letter English word that I don't wish to pronounce here!)

Farms commonly have piles of cow manure because it has value as fertilizer. I grew up in my early years of childhood on a farm and I remember the manure pile. They are most unpleasant, flies all over, stinky, etc. They are usually not very close to the farm house! Martin Luther says that's us---unpleasant and morally stinky! Very sinful.

But if it snows.....and my farm years were in North Dakota where it snows a lot! On the morning after a good snow, the manure would look very nice----a small hill covered with beautiful new white snow! Pure and white....but, of course, obnoxious as can be under that layer of snow. Martin Luther uses a snow-covered pile of manure as a word picture for Christians. God's mercy and forgiveness covers us like snow---it's beautiful! But underneath, we're still manure! In the next life, we will be totally transformed and become white and pure through and through----but in this life even Christians are still manure, but are covered with God's mercy (the snow!) and thus are saved. Saved, but not made very holy. We still morally smell!

We don't agree with Luther. Oh, we know very well that we are morally like manure. And we rejoice that God's mercy covers us like snow covering a manure pile! But....we don't think that has to be the *end* of the story in this life like Luther thought. We believe the manure underneath that beautiful

cover of snow can start to change in the here and now. We believe we can be transformed into snow in the here and now---not just a snowy covering on top until heaven. But an actual transformation, a growing into true purity and holiness in this life.

Why do we believe this? That people can actually change? That manure can become snow? Well, in addition to many indications of this in the Bible, we also have the evidence of thousands of Saints. People who have not just been forgiven, but whom God freed from sin and made pure *in this life*. Hard evidence of snow becoming manure! The word "saint" means "holy". The Saints are people who don't stay sinful but become holy in the here and now, who really become pure in heart.

And there is no reason this can't happen to us! Even if maybe not so completely as with the Saints, we can certainly get started in this life at being transformed from manure to snow. How? Remember St. Paul's words in Hebrews 12:14---"Strive for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord." This should be our main priority in this world----to strive, with God's help and grace, for purity of heart. For the manure to really change, not to just get covered with snow and look pretty.

Impossible? Many think so. But why would Jesus have given us the 6th Beatitude if it is impossible to become pure in heart? That would just not make sense! And if we get to know about the Saints, we will see it has happened---it is possible, it is real: purity in this life.

So make your life goal to be striving to leave all sin behind by cooperating with the grace and power of God. As Paul said, "strive" for purity of heart.....so that you can be blessed, so that you can see God.

Please don't put it off. It's true we may have many years for this striving. But it's also true we may have only days left to us for it. Death will come, but, of course, we have not idea when. So we need to get serious about this right away! And begin to see more and more of God. For as the Lord said, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."