

THE BEATITUDES: PORTRAIT OF THE MASTER PART 7: BLESSED ARE THE CLEAN OF HEART

“Blessed are the clean of heart, for they will see God” (Matthew 5:8).

The biblical notion of cleanness refers to a person’s suitability to approach sacred places and things and to participate in ritual worship. According to the Law of Moses, only those who were purified and clean could approach God in worship (Exodus 19:10-15). If a person became unclean, by doing something such as touching a corpse, for example (Numbers 5:2), the unclean person could not approach God or sacred things, lest those sacred things themselves be defiled and made unclean, a crime punishable by death (Leviticus 15:31). Because the service of God, embodied most clearly by the divine worship offered by the community, was central to the people’s identity and existence, unclean people were expelled from the community until they underwent the necessary purification (Numbers 5:1-4; Leviticus 11:24-25).

By the time of Jesus, the Jewish religious leadership had become very legalistic, substituting the Law itself for God. They placed external observance of the Law and the hundreds of rules and regulations that had sprung up around the Law above the true purpose of the Law, to explain how the people were to “love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind” (Deuteronomy 6:5) and to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). Jesus repeatedly challenged that thinking and called the people to a deeper understanding of what it meant to love and serve God: “The Pharisees and scribes questioned Jesus, ‘Why do your disciples not follow the tradition of the elders but instead eat a meal with unclean hands?’ He responded, ‘Well did Isaiah prophesy about you hypocrites, as it is written: This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me...Do you not realize that everything that goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters not the heart but the stomach and passes out into the latrine...But what comes out of a person, that is what defiles. From within people, from their hearts, come evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly. All of these evils come from within and they defile’ Mark 7:5-6, 18-23).

For Jesus, the cleanness needed to approach God is not external; it is a matter of the heart. It means removing from our hearts, from our desires, intellect, and will, all that is contrary to God and his will for us. Only then can we draw near to God and offer him fitting service and praise: “So submit yourselves to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you of two minds” (James 4:7-8). May we strive for this cleanness of heart always so that we may see God ever more clearly, in this life and in the life to come: “Then the angel showed me the river of life-giving water, sparkling like crystal, flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb...Nothing accursed will be found there anymore. The throne of God and the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will look upon his face and his name will be on their foreheads. Night will be no more, nor will they need light from lamp or sun, for the Lord God will give them light, and they will reign forever and ever” (Revelation 22:1, 3-5).