

# “Character that Counts: Purity”

Multiple Texts (responsive reading) <sup>1</sup>

Μακαριοι οι καθαροι τη καρδια, οτι αυτοι τον θεον οψονται.  
“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (Matthew 5:8).

It was the winter of 1942, just weeks after Pearl Harbor. As the United States entered the Great War, we were in a race with Germany to be first to develop an atomic bomb. On December 2, just five days before Pearl Harbor, a team of scientists led by Enrico Fermi had achieved the first controlled nuclear reaction under the abandoned bleachers of Stagg Field at the University of Chicago.

The stakes could not have been higher, and losing the Race to the Bomb was not an option. The United States pulled out all the stops to produce a bomb in a secret program known as “The Manhattan Project.” The primary material needed to produce a bomb was uranium 235. Naturally-occurring uranium is 99% U-238, with only 1% being the fissionable U-235. The challenge was to figure out how to separate the two types of uranium from each other.

There were three separation processes that might possibly work, but there was no time to wait for sequential studies, so the government acquired fifty-nine thousand acres in East Tennessee and built huge plants to attempt all three processes simultaneously. In those days before spy satellites, it was actually possible to build such a city secretly, and even as our local operation is sometimes known as “No Such Agency,” Oak Ridge was known as “the Secret City,” or “No Such City.”

As you know, one of those efforts (gaseous diffusion) was successful, and three years later, on July 14, 1945, the first nuclear explosion was unleashed at the Trinity test site in central New Mexico. J. Robert Oppenheimer, who had directed the project, said, “We waited until the blast had passed, walked out of the shelter, and then it was extremely solemn. We knew the world would not be the same. A few people laughed, a few people cried. Most people were silent. I remembered a line from the Hindu scripture [where Vishnu] says, ‘Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.’ I suppose we all thought that, one way or another.”<sup>2</sup>

Strange as it may seem, it seems to me that the Manhattan Project bears at least three similarities to our life in Christ. In the first place, we, too, are at war. We are engaged in spiritual warfare “*against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms*” (Ephesians 6:12). While the overall outcome of this war is not in doubt, the war does have optional endings as it relates to you and to me. I’ll come back to that after a while.

Second, while the percentages may not be quite the same, God can’t use “naturally-occurring humans” to change the world for good any more than naturally-occurring uranium can be used to build an atomic bomb. What’s needed to build a bomb is “weapons-grade” uranium, because in order to be detonated, uranium 235 has to be more than 90% pure (reactor-grade uranium is 3-4% pure).<sup>3</sup>

In order for our lives to be useful to God, they, too, must be pure, as Jesus pointed out in the sixth Beatitude: “*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God*” (Matthew 5:8). God needs “weapons-grade” disciples, not “naturally-occurring” humans, if God’s Kingdom is indeed to come on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:10).

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship of Columbia, Maryland on August 10, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> From Richard Rhodes, *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* (Simon & Schuster, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enriched\\_uranium](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enriched_uranium)

Finally, rather than causing Weapons-Grade Disciples to become “destroyers of worlds,” God transforms us into life-bringing persons who “turn the world upside down” to present God’s offer of redemption to all who will listen—*whatever it takes* (Acts 17:6; 2 Corinthians 5:19). God is in the process of creating a New Heaven and a New Earth, and God intends for you and me to be a part of that creation! As Paul told Timothy, “*If you keep yourself pure, you will be a utensil God can use for his purpose. Your life will be clean, and you will be ready for the Master to use you for every good work*” (2 Timothy 2:21, NLT).

So what does it mean to be “pure,” to be a Weapons-Grade Disciple that God can use in spiritual warfare that will bring in a New Creation? What is Jesus talking about here?

Well, having a pure heart is not about rules and regulations nearly so much as it is about sustained attention to the condition of our hearts and minds. This sustained attention requires just that: *sustained . . . attention*. A little girl said she liked Santa Claus better than Jesus because “You have to be good for Santa only at Christmas, but for Jesus you have to be good all the time.”<sup>4</sup> Well, she was right. Living a pure life is a challenge, isn’t it?

There are many dimensions to having a pure heart. One of the interesting things I do each week in sermon preparation is to type the key words from my text into Bible software to see how they’re used throughout the Bible, and “pure” and “purity” seem to have two main uses in the Bible.

The first use is similar to the idea of pure uranium. It refers to the pure gold that was used to construct the various parts of the Tabernacle and the Temple, and to the pure frankincense and myrrh that were used in the ceremonies of worship. The second primary use of “pure” and “purity” has to do with our use of our sexuality.

Another interesting thing I do each week is to plug my key words into *Google* to see what comes up. The results are frequently both amazing and distressing. The most prominent thing that came up when I checked *Google* for “purity” several years ago was dozens—maybe hundreds—of “purity” tests having to do with sexual behavior. I didn’t actually look at the tests, and I block such content these days, but I’ll bet that was all pretty gross. Still, it was interesting to see that both the Bible and “naturally-occurring” humans associate the word “purity” with sexuality.

Sexuality isn’t our main interest this morning, but let me say a thing or two about it. One of the chief characteristics of the ethic Jesus gave us is that it focuses on internal thoughts and attitudes much more than on overt behavior, recognizing that behavior is the result of thoughts and attitudes (Luke 6:45).

As I’m sure you know, much of our battle for spiritual purity takes place in the hidden recesses of our minds and hearts. Jesus told us that “*anyone who even looks at a woman with lust in his eye has already committed adultery with her in his heart*” (Matthew 5:28), and I presume the reverse is also true.

And so it was that Job said, “*I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a young woman*” (Job 31:1). One of my college professors said long ago, “You may not be able to help the first look, since it often comes by accident. But you can help the second.” James wrote, “*Each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death*” (James 1:14-15).

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<sup>4</sup> Vance Havner, “The Vance Havner Quotebook,” *Christianity Today*, vol. 38, no. 14.

Did you catch the key word there? The key word is “desire.” If you watched any of the *Tour de France* last month, I imagine you could see the passion, the pain, the struggle and the strain involved in the world’s most difficult bicycle race.

As I looked at those pictures, I asked myself, “Do I have that kind of passionate desire to be pure, to strain every nerve toward fulfilling God’s purposes in my life?” I’m afraid that on many days I’m more like a character I once saw in a cartoon than like Vincenzo Nibali, who won this year’s race. In that cartoon, a character says, “Well, I haven’t actually *died* to sin, but I did feel kind of *faint* once” (cp. Romans 6:2)<sup>5</sup>

In the sixth beatitude, Jesus told us, “*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*” So what’s this “seeing” all about? The gift of physical sight is one of God’s greatest gifts to us; yet if we assume for a moment that all of our eyes are corrected to 20-20, we still won’t all see the same thing even when we all look at the same thing at the same time.

Oliver Henderson is a realtor. If Oliver and I walk through the same house, what he sees and what I see is going to be very different, because Oliver has been trained to see things I haven’t been trained to see. Dave Larko is a meteorologist. If Dave and I look at the weather outside, what Dave sees is going to be very different than what I see, because he has prepared himself to see what the weather reveals. Larry Johnson is a pediatrician. If I were to walk through a hospital nursery with Larry, Larry would see many things that I wouldn’t see, because he has prepared himself to see what those little bodies and those complex machines reveal.

It’s simply one of the laws of life that we see only what we’ve prepared ourselves to see, and spiritual sight works the same way. And so, moment by moment and day by day, in countless ways both conscious and unconscious, you and I are fitting or unfitting our souls to see God. C. S. Lewis said that the reason that only the pure in heart will see God is that only the pure in heart want to see God, and only they prepare themselves to see Him.<sup>6</sup>

There’s more than this to it, though. The truth is that every person is going to see God. I mentioned earlier that Earth’s spiritual warfare has optional endings as it relates to our individual lives. At that appointment which awaits every one of us, at that appointment that is neither missed nor postponed, every one of us is going to see God either as welcoming Father or as righteous Judge. We’ll see God then as our lives have prepared us to see God now.

Let’s look at our three Manhattan Project comparisons one more time. The first comparison had to do with the fact that we still live in a wartime situation. There is much in this life that is beautiful and good, that is worthy of celebration and delight. These good gifts are hints of God’s delight in us, even as we delight in our own children.

At the same time, giving attention to joy and celebration needs to be kept in tension with the fact that we really and truly are at war. As Paul also told Timothy, “*As Christ’s soldier, do not let yourself become tied up in the affairs of this life, for then you cannot satisfy the one who has enlisted you in his army*” (2 Timothy 2:3-4, NLT). There is more going on around us—and in us—than we usually realize.

The second comparison had to do with the fact that naturally-occurring uranium can’t be used for bomb-making. Naturally-occurring uranium has to go through extensive and difficult purification processes in order to become “weapons-grade.”

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<sup>5</sup> Mary Chambers, *Leadership*.

<sup>6</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*.

As God looks at your life this morning, where would God put you on the continuum between naturally-occurring humanity and Weapons-Grade Disciples who can be deployed in spiritual warfare? Be as honest as you can about this. If you're rather quickly inclined to congratulate yourself on your state of readiness, it may help to remember that "the chief mark of counterfeit holiness is its lack of humility."<sup>7</sup>

Persons whose lives are truly pure tend to be aware of more areas in which God is at work in their lives than are persons for whom purity is more outer garment than inner reality. The reason for this is that when we're at some distance from God, who is Light, we're able to see only the largest and most flagrant of our sins, just as we see only large furniture when we walk through our homes in the dark. As we move closer to the radiance of God's holiness, though, we're able to see smaller and smaller imperfections.

Just as a jeweler works to remove microscopic flaws from a diamond that no ordinary person would ever notice, so God is at work in your life and in mine to make us able to experience and to contain the divine glory. C. S. Lewis wrote that God intends to make you and to make me into "dazzling, radiant, immortal creatures, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine."<sup>8</sup>

This transformation is very slow, as the running water of a creek polishes rocks in its path, and we easily become impatient. To make progress, we must steadfastly choose to continue seeking to have pure hearts, whether we perceive much progress or not.

There's a reason for the slow pace of our growth. Richard Foster noted that "On our own we [naturally-occurring humans] are not sufficient receptacles to contain the divine Blessing. We would simply blow apart, or something worse. Therefore, we should always value this ordinary way (this intolerably slow way) of growth, for through it God prepares us for things we can hardly imagine."<sup>9</sup>

Did you notice that Lewis and Foster both reminded us that what God wants to do in and through us is something we can't even imagine? Paul wrote that God "*is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us*" (Ephesians 3:20).

And that brings me to the third comparison, which is God's purpose that you and I become stewards of the New Creation. I can't tell you precisely what God intends to do through your life, but I can tell you that God intends for you to become a Weapons-Grade Disciple, "*so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand*" (Ephesians 6:13). I can tell you that God intends for you to be about the business of doing whatever it takes to tell folks in Columbia and around our world that "*God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people's sins against them . . . [and imploring them] on Christ's behalf to be reconciled to God*" (2 Corinthians 5:1-20).

The way to get there from here is to begin wherever you are right now. John Claypool once told a story about an Italian peasant who ran into a monk who lived in a monastery high above her village. She asked him, "Father, I've always wanted to ask what it is that you men of God do up there on top of the mountain that seems so close to heaven. I've always wondered about the life of holiness that you live up there."

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<sup>7</sup> Andrew Murray, "Humility, the Beauty of Holiness," *Christianity Today*, vol. 30, no. 1.

<sup>8</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 85.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Foster, *Spirit of the Disciplines*, p. 91.

“What do we do up there on the holy mountain?” the monk replied. “I’ll tell you what we do, my dear one. We fall down; we get up. We fall down; we get up. We fall down; we get up.”<sup>10</sup>

That’s the way of all Christian growth. It doesn’t happen all at once. We *become*.  
“*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*”

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<sup>10</sup> John Claypool, “You Don’t Have to be Good to Come to Christ,” *Preaching Today*, tape no. 83.

# Purity

**Reader One:** *“God blesses those whose hearts are pure, for they will see God”*  
(Matthew 5:8).

Reader Two: *“Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me”*  
(Psalm 51:10).

**Reader One:** *“Do not let any part of your body become a tool of wickedness, to be used for sinning. Instead, give yourselves completely to God since you have been given new life. And use your body to do what is right for the glory of God”* (Romans 6:13).

Reader Two: *“You belong to God, so run from all evil things, and follow what is right and good. Pursue a godly life, along with faith, love, perseverance, and gentleness. . . . Enjoy the companionship of those who call on the Lord with pure hearts”*  
(1 Timothy 6:11; 2 Timothy 2:22).

**Reader One:** *“If you keep yourself pure, you will be a utensil God can use for his purpose. Your life will be clean, and you will be ready for the Master to use you for every good work”* (2 Timothy 2:21).

Reader Two: *“For I want you to understand what really matters, so that you may live pure and blameless lives until Christ returns . . . children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars”* (Philippians 1:10, 2:15).

**Reader One:** *“Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things”* (Philippians 4:8).

Leader: The Word of God for the People of God.

**People:** **Thanks be to God!**