

Can See

By Jon Weatherly

We thought the carpet was clean, but we were wrong. The salesperson invited us to run the vacuum cleaner over a spot in the corner. Then he shined an ultraviolet light where we had cleaned. We saw specks of dirt we couldn't see before.

Most of us like being clean. We may not like the chore of cleaning, but we like the results. We especially want ourselves and our homes to be clean when we have company. The more important the company, the higher our standard of cleanliness.

So if God is present, we want the cleanest kind of clean, absolute purity. That's why Jesus said, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (Matthew 5:8). God's presence demands purity in all parts of a person, especially in the part that God alone can see, the heart. The good news is that through Jesus, God cleanses us to make us pure, pure outside and inside, pure for his presence.

The Quest for Purity

The Law of Moses stressed the need for purity in God's presence. Israel's most potent symbols, the tabernacle (later, the temple) and the promised land, served as object lessons about purity.

The tabernacle was constructed according to a divinely given design as a visible reminder of God's presence. At its center was the most holy place. The ark of the covenant resided there, the symbol of God's gracious relationship with Israel. On top of the ark was the mercy seat, the symbolic place where Israel was purified of its sins on the Day of Atonement. The presence of the ark pointed to the presence of God himself. Only the high priest could enter the most holy place, and only on the Day of Atonement. As a further symbol of purity, he was required to bathe himself and wear special garments on that day (Leviticus 16:4).

The rest of the tabernacle was divided into areas with increasingly restricted access as one drew closer to the most holy place. It

reminded all who came near that utter purity, something that no person possessed on his own, was necessary to approach the presence of God.

The lesson of the tabernacle was underscored by the lesson of the promised land. God presented it to Israel as his land, given to them as his gracious gift. Because the land was God's, its inhabitants were to be pure. Impurity meant expulsion from the land (Leviticus 18:24–30). So God was present not only in the tabernacle, but in the whole land, and his people were to live pure lives in his presence.

Visible, ceremonial purity was a reminder of invisible purity, the purity of the heart. It reminded Israel of what they needed to do in order to live in God's presence. "Who may ascend the hill of the Lord, or who may stand in his holy place?" asked the psalmist. "He who has clean hands and a pure heart" (Psalm 24:3, 4).

Visible, ceremonial purity was a reminder of invisible purity, the purity of the heart.

Purity of the heart meant pure thoughts giving rise to pure actions. It meant an inner life of devotion to God that directed every outward action to be obedient to God. It meant a will that gave no place to other loyalties. Only in such a heart can God genuinely be present.

The Promise of Purity

Israel's law showed the need to be clean. But its history showed the impossibility of attaining real purity.

After generations of Israel's failure, God did what he had warned in the law: he expelled the people from the land of promise. The Babylonians destroyed the temple, the great symbol of God's presence, and took the people captive into another land.

But with this disappointment came a further promise. God's purpose—to have a pure people—would not be thwarted. The purity God required could not be attained by human effort. So God promised to cleanse his people himself.

Given Purity By Jesus

Against this background of need and hope Jesus proclaimed, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (Matthew 5:8). As a part of Jesus' good news, this Beatitude announced that the long-sought presence of God and the long-sought purity needed to experience it were now a reality. Matthew's Gospel shows us how that message comes together.

First, Matthew shows us that in Jesus, God is present. Then he shows us that in Jesus, God came to cleanse. Matthew also shows us that God came to rule. Jesus came into the world as the king of God's kingdom. Jesus will fulfill God's purpose among his people. As subjects of his kingdom, they will live out what God has always intended. They will become a pure people, fit for his presence as king.

Living Purity for Jesus

What will it take for that purity to be real in the lives of God's people? The answer is found in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, to which his blessing on the pure in heart belongs.

God is supremely pure. Therefore, so are his people. As his rule takes root, they fulfill God's purpose that he expressed to Israel in the Old Testament. Jesus announced that he came not to destroy the law, to end God's demand of purity, but to fulfill it, establishing real purity in his people. Ceremonial purity always pointed to a deeper purity. Jesus made that promise a reality.

That purity is more than just what people can see. It is what God

alone can see: purity of the heart. People can see outward actions. We can do them simply to be seen and congratulated by others. But only God sees the heart. Where God rules, where he has brought purity, his people will conform to his will inside and out. Not just clean on the outside, like so many religious leaders

Where God rules, where he has brought purity, his people will conform to his will inside and out.

Create in Me a Pure Heart, O God!

So where does this call for purity leave us now? How can we live out the purity that Jesus gives?

We begin by acknowledging God's presence with us—always and everywhere. In Jesus God has inaugurated his reign over all the earth. We do not have a Sunday-morning life and a rest-of-the-week life, a church life and a world life. God is present. His presence demands purity.

His presence means that we have no secrets. We can conceal ourselves from other people, but not from God. There is no use trying to hide what our hearts

hold. We can only confess to him openly.

His presence means cleansing. Knowing we are impure only makes us rely on him more to make us pure. Through Jesus, God visits our lives. But gracious God that he is, as he visits, he cleanses our impurities, even in places that we cannot see ourselves, making us fit for him.

His presence means power. We are not left in a

(Matthew 23:25), they will have a greater righteousness that starts on the inside (Matthew 5:26).

So, Jesus says, in God's kingdom God's people are pure not just from murder on the outside but from the anger on the inside that gives rise to it (Matthew 5:21-26). They are pure not just from sexual immorality on the outside but from the lust on the inside that gives rise to it (Matthew 5:27-32). They do all their acts of obedience to God—giving to the needy (Matthew 6:1-4), praying (Matthew 6:5-15), fasting (Matthew 6:16-18)—not to be seen by other people but to be seen by God alone. God sees the secret places: the inside of the closet and the inside of the heart. Living constantly in God's presence, the people of God's kingdom seek to bring every part of their lives into subjection to God's rule.

hopeless cycle of failure. As he cleanses, he enables us to overcome our failure, both inside and out. We continue to hope and trust in him to make us the pure people that he intends.

This is how we see God, the great promise of Jesus' proclamation of purity. As he cleanses us, as he rules in us, we learn what it genuinely is to live in the purity of his presence.

Through Jesus the purity of God's presence is our eternal destination. Through him it is also our present calling. It causes us continually to cry out, "Create in me a pure heart, O God!" (Psalm 51:10).

It makes us cling to the cross. ■

Jon Weatherly is a professor of New Testament and Academic Dean at Cincinnati Bible College & Seminary, Cincinnati, Ohio.

