

*How Then Shall We Live: The Call To Purity*  
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*Psalm 24:1-5, Hebrews 12:2-15, Matthew 18:1-10*

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Matthew 18:1-10. Listen now to God's Word. "At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come! If your hand or your foot causes you to sin cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell. See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven."

I've always wondered about Ivory Soap. You know the one, advertised for generations as the soap so pure, it floats – 99.44% pure. I wanted to know – what's the .56 percent? I thought soap was supposed to be 100% soap! And as it turns out, it's not the purity that makes Ivory Soap float...they actually whip air into it to make it lighter than water. It turns out that the advertising campaign on purity wasn't all that pure after all.

If you think about it, we want things we have to be pure. There was a lawsuit recently over the meat in Taco Bell tacos, whether with all the fillers and whatnot they put in it they can still legitimately call it beef. The very thought of it kind of churns the stomach, doesn't it? When you get a hamburger or a steak, you want that thing to be all cow! We pay for our gasoline based on its relative purity – the better the gasoline, the less likely it is to damage your engine. Purity is something we expect...and when things aren't pure, there can be catastrophic effects. Much of the death and disease around the world is caused by impure drinking water. Impurities in wood or construction materials can bring down a house. There are many things in this world where there's "good enough" – but in many others, purity makes a life and death difference.

So, if God is our Father, and moreover our Creator who created us specifically to glorify Him and enjoy Him forever...is it any surprise that He calls us to purity as well? Just as we desire purity from the things we need in life, so God has made us intentional to be pure for Him. As we continue our series on the ethics of Scripture, we're going to look at what the Bible tells us about purity and how we can live it out in a fallen world.

Fallenness is what characterizes the human race now – sin, brokenness, and a loss of innocence. But God didn't create it that way. When humanity was first brought into being, God created us perfect – and innocent. Scripture tells us that before the fall, Adam and Eve were naked and unashamed. This wasn't from naivety – they weren't simple-minded. They were pure. They lacked the knowledge of good and evil. When they disobeyed God – that was when they lost their innocence. It was compounded by the sudden rush of knowledge they gained when they ate from the tree in the garden, but it wasn't that knowledge that made them impure. It was disobedience. And this was a breakdown in the system; this was not what was intended. God's intention was always for His creation to be spotless and blameless. He made us to be holy – He made us to be like Him. And that's why God still desires us to be people of purity.

As we move through the Old Testament, we see purity at its center. The Hebrew word for "pure" is *tahor* – the same word that means "clean." The Old Testament law is obsessed with God's people being ritually clean, being *tahor*. We have clean and unclean animals; we have actions that make one pure and impure. The law governs how people act so they may be *tahor* before God. This same word describes the items made for use in the temple – all of them were to be made out of pure gold without any impurities. God's house was filled with items that were themselves pure, reminding His people of His own purity. When someone made an offering to God, it was made on an altar that had been purified. The law also repeatedly said that offerings made to God had to be of animals that had no defects. Later on in the Old Testament, through the prophet Malachi, God rebukes the Israelites for offerings whatever they wanted rather than giving Him their best. God desired the pure and unblemished because He is a God of purity.

But God's desire for purity didn't just reside in rituals and sacrifices. God desired purity of heart. As Psalm 24 this morning told us, the upright person acceptable to God is the one with "clean hands and a pure heart." In Psalm 51, David begs God to create in him a "clean heart." God commends those who act blamelessly and walk in righteousness, but that's not easy. In Psalm 73, the Psalmist knows that God loves those who have kept themselves pure, but he wrestles with his purity when he sees the wicked prosper. And there's always the lurking spectre of the impossibility of purity. Solomon writes in Proverbs 20:9, "Who can say, "I have kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin?" The kind of holiness God desires seems beyond us.

The call for holiness and purity grows stronger when Jesus comes on the scene, but it also becomes a reality rather than a pipe dream. Jesus teaches the people during the Sermon on the Mount, "be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect." In today's passage, Jesus talks about those who enter the Kingdom of God having humility and innocence like that of little children. The letters of the apostles confirmed over and over again that purity and holiness were an absolute necessity – as Hebrews 12 put it this morning, "without holiness no one will see the Lord." It becomes an imperative; purity is not just an option but commanded of believers.

But there's good news at the heart of all of it. Jesus is called the perfect lamb without spot or blemish. Jesus' sacrifice for us on the cross was one of utter purity, and through it, all who put their faith and trust in Jesus are purified. They are seen as holy in God's sight. God gives us Jesus' own righteousness as a garment to wear. That's why baptism is such a huge thing, a sacrament in the church – it represents us being washed by Jesus' blood and cleansed from our impurity and clothed in God's own purity.

This clothing of us with God's own righteousness and being seen as righteous, even though we are not fully transformed, through the sacrifice of Jesus is called justification. But God doesn't plan for us to stay the way we are and just pretend we are pure; He intends for us to become pure. The Holy Spirit is given to believers so that we can become holy, so we can truly be righteous. The process by which God transforms us into holy people is called sanctification. And if you are a Christian, if you believe and trust in Jesus Christ as your Savior, then the process of sanctification is already underway in your life by the Holy Spirit's work. As God recreates us and restores us, He gives us the privilege to work with the Holy Spirit in reclaiming that purity we were always meant to have.

Now that we've tracked the pursuit of purity through Scripture, there're two major things I'd like you to be able to contemplate this week. First, I want us to see that purity touches every aspect of our lives. Second, Scripture gives us two major ways of becoming pure. These two things, if we really take them seriously, may change us from the inside out. *First: purity touches every aspect of our lives.* The church has a history of putting the primary emphasis of purity on sexual purity. When I went looking for prayers on purity online this week, I got back thousands of prayers that were really about maintaining chastity, of waiting until marriage. A really typical thing among young Christians who are committed to wait until marriage is to wear what's commonly called a "purity ring" to remind themselves of that commitment. And all of these things are really good...but they can be misleading when they make us think of purity only being about one aspect of life.

In our psalm this morning, purity is contrasted with idolatry and lying. Other psalms teach purity fears the LORD. Psalm 119 says purity lies in living according to God's Word. Both testaments teach that purity lies in both our thought lives and our actions. The prophet Habakkuk describes God's purity, saying He cannot look upon evil or tolerate wrongdoing. The book of Titus puts purity in the same league as self-control. James says pure religion is to help those in distress and to keep from being polluted by the world. The list continues on.

When I look at it as a whole, purity is intentional innocence in a corrupted world. It is not born out of a naïve unknowing but a deliberate determination to steer clear of the world's offers of sin. To be pure requires us to be intentional about our lives. You cannot just wander into purity. Sin has made our natural state impure, and so we must look to become pure in the whole realm of our existence. It is moving from a state of selfishness, a place where my desire is to use other people for my own benefit, to a state of selflessness, a place where my desire is directly linked with Christ's desires and other people are to be served and honored.

This also means that no one is free from the pursuit of purity. You may not have temptations in areas that we tend to think of terms of purity and impurity. You may not lust; you may not covet; you may not desire power. Good for you! And yet there are other places too that must be addressed – purity of speech, purity of thought, purity of deed, purity of action, an elimination of the selfishness of our old life apart from Christ and an embrace of a totally honorable and righteous way of life. God wants you to be pure just like His Son was pure. Paul says he wants to present the church to Christ as a pure bride. In Revelation, we have a vision of us, the church, being presented to Jesus totally faultless and readied for Him. That means that every last part of our being is going to be made pure, and that process has already started.

So if that's the case, we need to know how we can do our part in the process. Scripture gives us two major ways of being and becoming pure. There are many other practices we can do we find in the New Testament, but these two are the most specific teachings God has given us. Both require effort, but they are very effective if we are willing to put them into practice.

The first we find in Philippians 4:8, where Paul tells believers this: "Finally, brothers, 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." This is all about working to focus ourselves on things that are pure and worthwhile in the mind of God. When this becomes a part of our regular thought life, we start to examine things around us. We begin developing patterns where we consciously evaluate what we consume and determine if what we expose ourselves to is glorifying to God. We inspect ourselves and Scripture and figure out what is true, what is noble, and what is right in God's sight.

How might this look in the real world? For one, we might see our entertainments in a new light. When we watch an episode of *House* or *NCIS*, we might start looking for themes that fit into a Christian worldview, seeing what is admirable and noble about them...and also carefully examining what isn't and seeing how we can learn from it. When we choose a movie, we might not only check the rating but see what others have to say about how it reflects beauty and truth. When we watch sports, are we just cheering our team on, or can we see the excellence of an athlete who has trained hard so that he can make that jump shot or hit that grand slam?

The truth is, we are exposed to tons of things that can be really good for our spiritual lives if we let them be rather than letting them passively wash over us. Even some things that might contain realistic depictions of sin and brokenness might be OK as long as we are able to see the noble, the truthful, and the godly in them. If we are under the leadership of Christ, then putting our brains into neutral isn't an option. And maybe when we need a break, when we really do need a time out for our brains to recover from the pounding influence of the world, instead of turning on the TV or radio and "vegging," we take a moment to pray, to read Scripture, maybe just to actually rest for a few minutes so God can speak into our hearts.

The other way that Christ calls us to purity is through what we saw Him speak about in today's final Scripture passage. We don't like the imagery, but Jesus said that if your eye caused you to sin, gouge it out. If your hand caused you to sin, cut it off. I don't think anybody took Him literally, and yet Matthew thought this teaching was so important that he recorded Jesus saying it twice in two different contexts. It's that important for us to understand.

In many circles, this teaching has been called "radical amputation." And it's clear that the eye or the hand isn't the cause of sin, but it can be the tool of it, the means by which sin is carried out. The issue at hand is taking the utmost care as to what we allow ourselves to witness and participate in. If you know you can't handle something, if there is a temptation inherently involved, then cut yourself off from it completely. Nothing in this world is so important to risk your salvation for it. We have a tendency to think, "Well, if I do this thing, God will forgive me because I believe in Him." But here's the thing – if you consistently violate God's commands to satisfy your own desires and pursuits, you may think you have faith in Jesus, but you don't. The faith you have in God is only as real as the way you act as His son or daughter.

That's why radical steps, radical amputation, has to take place. Now this isn't a new set of laws that you've got to follow. We aren't talking about legalism. You remember that old standard, "Don't smoke, drink, or chew or hang out with those who do?" Remember the rules about not playing cards because it just might cause someone to gamble? That's not what I'm talking about in any way. This isn't about what society might say is or isn't good for you. This is about your purity, your standing in front of Jesus Christ. You know what sins tempt you, and if you don't, start listening for the Holy Spirit to gently speak into your life. You'll realize them soon enough if you take the time to listen to God's leading.

Here's what radical amputation looks like. Men, if you know the 7-11 carries girly magazines and you're tempted to take a peak when you stop there, buy your gas and your snacks somewhere else. Find another route home so you don't even go near the place. If you're tempted by Internet sites, get a filter for your computer – and if you know how to bypass the filter, maybe it's time to take the Internet connection out of your home. You're better off without Facebook and email if the other stuff out there is going to cause you to sin. If you're one of those folks who can't drink one drink and be done, don't touch the stuff. You may not be an alcoholic, but you're setting yourself up for impurity. Women, if you have a friend or a gal at the salon or whomever where all you can do is gossip, cut that relationship off. End it! If you subscribe to magazines that are trashy, cancel them! Your purity is worth more than knowing that so and so did such and such. If you're glued to the TV set or if you find yourself watching stuff that's unwholesome, turn the thing off, and if it's really a problem, throw the thing out! Your purity is more important than being able to talk about a show at the water cooler. And if you catch yourself starting to think about something impure, determine ahead of time that when it happens, cut it off before it grows in your mind. Your purity is more important than everything else. Jesus Christ gave His life so your purity could be restored – don't waste that.

I'm going to close with a story today from my own life, one that still reminds me of how big this purity thing is to God and how easy it is to lose it. When I lived in Russia for a year, I was isolated from virtually all American culture. I didn't understand the language much so we watched very little TV except a few videos we'd brought from home. I read Scripture a lot along with classics and science fiction. When I got back after that year, I found that television shows I took as normal were now highly offensive, to the point that I literally couldn't sit through an episode of *Friends*. I didn't get it then, but I had been incredibly desensitized, and my time away had resensitized me to purity. It didn't take all that long, though, to get back into old habits and patterns, and things I thought were impure before didn't bother me. In fact, *Friends* became a favorite show.

It wasn't until recently that I realized how much impurity I let into my life, when I saw an episode of a show with the boys around that I didn't want them to see. It reminds me of the little children Jesus pointed to in today's lesson – not only do I want to protect them, I'm supposed to become like them again, innocent. The Holy Spirit is working on that in my life, and if you're a believer, He's working on your life too. God has given us a role to play, and that's to defend our purity as God restores it within us. It goes back to that old Sunday school tune many of us know... "be careful, little eyes, what you see... be careful, little ears, what you hear... be careful, little mouth, what you say..." And always remember the most important line – "There's a Father up above, looking down in tender love." God loves you and will steer you toward His purity.