

### **“Crazy, Life—Mercy, Purity”**

I've made some new friends recently in all that's happened around the tornado. We had some friends visit last weekend from Minnesota, Jay and his wife Cindy. That Friday night we were roasting marshmallows and making s'mores and goofing off and Jay said to his wife, "Doesn't he remind you of Jason?" She says, "Yes! They're like twins, doppelgangers. You'd love each other!" We've all had somebody say something like that to us. When I hear that last part I think, "Would I really want to hang out with somebody like me?" Because, selfishly, I kind of like to be the only me around! I have to work hard enough to get a laugh. What if there were two of me in a room trying to be funny? No good.

Anyway, so they say, "You're just like Jason!" And I think, "This could be interesting. I see what the really think of me by how they describe him!" Kind of an opportunity to hear what people REALLY think of you. It's an insecurity I have, OK! So I ask, "What's the guy like?" And they say, "He's funny, and kind of weird, sort of a spaz..." I'm waiting for something good here! "And he's really a man of faith, and a great friend, just a blast to be around." I'm like "Whew!"

If somebody ever says that to you, "You're just like so-and-so, you'd love him, or her..." Go ahead and ask them what they're like and you might get a little insight into who you are, or are perceived to be.

On Monday last week we held Lisa Workman's funeral here in this room. It's the room where I married her and her husband in 1998. She was 44 and had been battling cancer for almost 5 years. Her brothers and husband spoke at the funeral I listened to how they described her—loving, intelligent, gifted, faithful. Since she was about the same age as me it made me think, "How would I be described, if that were me?" How would you be described if it were you?

That brings me to the parts of the Bible we're going to look at today. Because they focus on two words. Merciful and pure. Jesus said, "**Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God**" (Matthew 5:7-8). I wonder how many of us would be described with those two words, among other characteristics of course. "That, Aaron, he's just like my friend." How so? "So merciful, so pure." I didn't do a survey or anything, so I don't know for sure, but I don't think the people closest to me would start off describing me using those two words. In fact, they might go through a lot of other adjectives before they ever got to those, if they did at all. What about you? Would merciful and pure be in the list of how the people who know you best would describe you? Merciful and pure?

Before you really answer that let's get at the real meaning of these words. They're in a group of statements that Jesus is making where he says, "Blessed are you if you live out these characteristics..." And **the word he used for "blessed" in Greek is *markarios* which means God-like joy**, a joy that is independent of circumstances, independent of chance, independent of change. It's the joy, the bliss, that is unbreakable, and unshakable. He's saying, "If that sounds like something you want in life, then listen to what I'm about to tell you and put it into practice and this unshakable, unbreakable joy will be yours. You will find the sweet-spot in life like you never thought possible."

Let's figure out, let's learn, what Jesus means when he says, "**Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.**" To us mercy might mean to feel sorry for somebody in need and even to help in some way. But that's not the real meaning. **The Hebrew word for mercy is the word *chesedh***. It means the ability to get right inside the other person's skin until you can see things with their eyes and, think with their thoughts, and feel with their feelings. That's a lot more than just feeling pity on somebody. It's true sympathy. In fact the meaning of the word sympathy is to experience with somebody, or suffer with somebody, to literally go through what somebody else is going through.

Now the problem with this understanding of mercy is that our culture is obsessed is with pain-avoidance. We don't want to hurt, or ache physically, or relationally, or financially. We don't really like to make sacrifices except for our own pleasure. We're a culture of pleasure-seeking and pain-avoidance. If that's the case, how easy is it for us to want to get into somebody else's pain? How eager are we to suffer with somebody else? Not very. When we feel sorry for somebody, we'd rather do that from a safe distance, from the outside.

Jesus is saying, blessed are those who make the intentional effort to get inside the heart and mind of someone else to feel what they feel and to see what they see. Would that make a difference if we tried to do that? I think it would a few ways.

If we actually spent the effort of getting inside somebody else's skin I think it would keep us from helping in the wrong way. After hurricane Katrina hit my mom and step-dad's church collected a whole bunch of supplies to send down. My mom and step-dad gathered it all up to take it down there personally. But do you know what they got a whole bunch of? Heavy winter coats! Now, that's a kind gesture, but I wonder if people would have given heavy winter coats if they really would have gotten in the skin of the people on the Gulf Coast where it barely gets below 60 degrees.

You've probably been on the receiving end of somebody's kindness where their act of kindness didn't really connect with your need because, for whatever reason, they just didn't see your situation through your eyes. I've been on the receiving end of some bad kindness and on the giving end. There've been times when I tried to help people in the way I thought was best, rather than what they really needed. And they were polite and put up with my bad kindness. I could have avoided that if I had only made the effort to get inside their feelings and thoughts.

I got an email last week from a woman in St. Charles whose 8 year old heard our story and wanted to do something. The kids of their church collected children's books and videos and they're having a sale at their church and sending the proceeds to help the kids of Joplin. Lots of people have called and asked what they can do, that's an attempt to see through our eyes and offer kindness that we really need.

I think one of the great acts of kindness that people have done since the tornado is the quilts that they've sent from all over the country. There's one in particular that came with a note. Let me read it to you and show you the quilt: Dear Friend, Hi! How are you? My name is Becca. I'm so glad you are getting my quilt. I heard about the tornado. Is your family okay? I might come to visit you sometime. Did you know I scooped horse poop? It is so much fun. Oh, before I forget, a horse's pee is smellier than it's poop! Do you like horses? Because I love horses! Please write me back...Your friend, Becca Burns. Take a look at her quilt! The kindness of this quilt is in its story, it's humor. I laugh every time I read that!

The next time a tornado hits a community somewhere, do you think we'll know how to help? I think so, because we will be able to feel their feelings, and see through their eyes, get in there skin and know what it's like. In fact I would bet that most of us are now more prepared than ever to help people that suffer through any tragedy because of what we've been through. Especially if we're deliberate, intentional, about seeing through that person's eyes, feeling their feelings, hearing their story, getting in their skin. Real mercy would keep us from bad acts of kindness.

I also think that real mercy, stepping inside somebody else's skin, would help us forgive others and be more tolerant of others. I was taught a long time ago that it's almost impossible to hate someone if you know, really know, their story. Because there is ALWAYS a reason why people think and act the way they do. And if we know the reason, it's so much easier to forgive when they hurt us or somebody we love. If somebody is rude, if somebody is irritable, they may have been through something that if you knew it, you'd say, "I see. I understand. I forgive."

When a neighbor is rude, when a coworker is irritable, when a family member lashes out, it could be that they are overcome with worry, or pain, or just a history of bad experiences or bad upbringing. Do your best to find out. Be deliberate in trying to get inside their skin and chances are you will be able to offer forgiveness and tolerance. Mercy starts there.

But listen, isn't that what God did in Jesus? God got into the skin of humanity. He came as man; he came seeing things with our eyes; feeling things with our feelings; thinking things with our minds. God knows what it's like to be you because he got inside our skin to **know** what's it like to be you, and me, facing our pain, our joys, our challenges, our struggles. God got in our skin. God demonstrated mercy and challenges us to be merciful.

Now, Jesus says, if you are merciful you will be shown mercy. That's very true on a human level. Listen, if people see that you are detached and distant, they will probably be detached and distant too. If people see that you care, they are much more likely care about you. The merciful will be shown mercy.

What's true on the human side is also true when it comes to God. When we are merciful to others, it opens the flow of God's mercy toward us. So the Aaron Brown translation of this would be something like, **Oh baby! The joy of the one who works to see with the eyes of others, feel their feelings, know their thoughts. In doing that you will find others do the same for you and you will know what Jesus has done.**

Now, I think the next statement that Jesus makes is the hardest one so far. **"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (Matthew 5:8).** If we take this one seriously it means doing that ruthless self-examination I talked about last week, but in a different way. **The word for pure here in Greek is the word *katharos*.** It's got several meanings that help us apply this to our lives. **One meaning is simply "clean."** Like dirty clothes that have been washed. Or grain that's free from debris, or chaff. It was used of an army that had purged the soldiers that didn't want to be there, that were cowards, that were unwilling to make sacrifices. It had become an army that was clean, **pure**. The word for pure was also used of milk or wine that had not been diluted—nobody likes that—or gold that was free of alloys and lesser metals. Blessed are the pure, the clean, the undiluted.

Let's talk about having pure motives. This is one I'll admit that I struggle with. Because in any situation I can look at my motives and I see impurity. I strive to be generous and give to all kinds of good causes, but I see it in there, a little bit of self-congratulations, a hope that somebody will notice. I'll do things that are the right thing to do, the hard thing, the sacrificial thing, but I see the impurity in my motives—it should would be nice if somebody saw it and thought of me as a martyr. I stand up here and try to teach so that we can all learn and grow and connect more deeply to God. But I'm fully aware that my motives aren't pure. There is that part of me that likes being in the spotlight, that likes the attention. If I were to guess, I'd say that my motives are 95% pure. OK, maybe 90%. But that 5 or 10% grosses me out. I don't want it in there. And that's just motives.

I don't know about you but there are other impurities in me. As I look at it, a lot of it is an accumulation of dirt, a film of grime that's built up over the years. Some of it's from the influence of people that I hung out with who added to that dirt—taught me things that I wish I'd never learned. Introduced me to things I wish I never would have been introduced to. Some of that layer of grime is from things I've seen—movies, TV, things on the internet, things I've read. That stuff is in here, and over time it fades, but it seems like there is always something to add another layer of grime. It's like I need some spiritual Formula 409 to gut through the grime. And when I say that I need it, I'm not letting you off the hook. When I say I need some purity, what I'm really saying is we need it! I suppose that's one of the benefits of having a pastor who's seen a few things and done a few things, I'm not letting you off the hook because I know you, I'm like you. If those layers continue to build up the end result is that your mind gets so dirty that you can make everything seem dirty, you can turn every comment toward something sexual, something derogatory, something disgusting. I know because I've been there too. And if you're there, it time to turn around, you don't have to stay there. You don't have to live with that in you.

Blessed are the pure in heart. And pure doesn't mean 80% pure, or 90% pure, or even like Ivory soap, 99 <sup>44</sup>/<sub>100</sub>% pure. Anybody else wonder what the other <sup>56</sup>/<sub>100</sub>ths is? They're telling you right there! Impurity! Yuck! I want to know, like what kind of impurity? Hair? Rodent droppings? Nuclear waste? Lead? Boogers? Squinkies? Sarcasm? What? When I think about that little bit of impurity, it kind of grosses me out. Either something is pure, or it's not.

Now, when I say that out loud, I'm thinking, "I don't stand a chance on this one! So why even try?" But I also don't want to just give up and say, "This is as good its gets. 80% pure is all I can muster." Jesus once said, **"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48).** Our grasp should exceed our reach, right? There is something rewarding in striving for a mighty goal—purity—even if we never fully achieve it. And to say that I can't achieve it is to say that I'm not really going to let God help.

So how do we strive for purity? This is another one of those things that requires ruthless self-examination. Asking the hard questions of yourself and inviting God to show you things that you don't really want to see, or change, and asking God to give you the strength and courage to change them.

Let me get more specific on this form of self-examination. Paul wrote these words, **“Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31)** In the original Greek, the word for “all” here is *hapas* and it means, “all.” Does the way you talk to your spouse bring glory to God? Does the way you treat your kids bring glory to God? Do your sexual habits bring glory to God? Do your internet habits bring glory to God? Does the way you use your money bring glory to God? Does the way you treat that waitress, or busboy, or ticket agent, or your boss bring glory to God? Does what you put in your body bring glory to God? Do your TV habits bring glory to God? Does how you treat the poor, the mentally ill, the mentally disabled, bring glory to God? Do your hobbies bring glory to God? Does your integrity, your honesty, bring glory to God? Does your language bring glory to God? Purity.

Here’s the challenge I want to lay on you. It’s the one-week purity challenge. We can do this, take the purity challenge for one week and see what happens. Begin by asking God to show you what the impurities are in your life, that’s the easy part. He’s already been telling you what they are—you probably already know what they are. And then for a week keep those impurities out. Switch them off, pour them out, clean them up, unplug, avoid, whatever, just try it for a week. For some of you one week might be way too much. Do the one-day purity challenge. Try it in your real-world setting and see what happens. Jesus says that you will see God. Give this a try and then let me know how you see God. Where you see God. What it feels like to see God. What goes through your mind when you see God.

It’s only by grace that we are able to be pure, not by our own work alone, but God does something supernatural. As we strive to do our part, our work at becoming pure goes much further than we ever thought possible because God doubles it. Triples it. The Aaron Brown translation of this statement. **Oh baby! The amazing joy, the bliss, of the one whose motives and life is absolutely pure. For that one will see God!** I don’t know about you, but I want to see God. And I’m not going to settle for where I am. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. And for today that is the Good news. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.