

“The Pure in Heart”

Introduction: It’s sometimes said that Christmas is about the birthday of Jesus. Well, on one level, I suppose that’s true. But the greater truth we celebrate in this season is the way that Jesus reveals, and helps us to see, the living God. As the gospel writer John concludes his opening comments about Jesus: “No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known” (1:18). This notion about being able to “see God” that we declare in this season fits right in with our next beatitude: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”

Let’s ask some questions of this statement. What does it mean to “see” God? Why would we want to see God? How might we go about it? Ultimately, we want to understand that the more we respond to the invitation of Jesus, “Come, follow me,” the more we will see who God is and what he desires for us.

I. What does it mean to see God?

A. Seeing, of course, can take place on many levels. How, we might wonder, is Jesus using the verb “to see?” Literally? Figuratively? Metaphorically? Are we to see God like we see trees and mountains and other people, or in some kind of mental-emotional way? Maybe the best answer is, all of the above! To see God is to come to know God, trust God, understand God, and experience God in a deeper and deeper way.

B. I actually think of that little fellow we meet in Luke’s gospel named Zacchaeus. He was a hated, cheating, chief tax collector. But Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus so he climbed that sycamore tree. Not only did he see Jesus but Jesus saw him, asked him to come down, and invited himself to Zacchaeus’ house. There, Zacchaeus evidently saw God more and more clearly until he promised to make restitution for his past, cheating ways, whereby Jesus declared him to be a part of the faith of Abraham (Lk. 19:1-9). Zacchaeus came to know, trust, understand, and experience God in a deeper way.

II. Why would we want to see God?

A. So let’s then ask, why would we want to see God? Why would it matter? To which I would respond that I think most people would wonder if there is a God, and then if there is, what he is like, and beyond that does he offer me any meaning and purpose for my life, and even beyond that, what is his plan for the future and how does he intend to clean up the mess that the world so often seems to be?! You might have more reasons, or questions, but even if just for those, it seems that “seeing” God, coming to know, understand, trust, and experience God in a deeper way just might be a good idea!

III. How do we see God?

A. What is probably most clear is what is developed for us in John’s gospel as he goes on to record Jesus as saying: “The one who looks at me is seeing the one who sent me” (12:45). And, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (14:9). Add to the mix the magnificent claim Paul makes to the church in Colossae, that Jesus is “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15), and toss in the opening comment by the writer of Hebrews: “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being” (Heb. 1:3), and the unseen God, John is declaring to his readers, the God “who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see” as Paul writes to Timothy (1 Tim. 6:16), has

become approachable, has become knowable, has become see-able in Jesus. That is the real Christmas miracle!

B. Of course, it's not quite that simple! As I'm sure you've noticed, Jesus includes "pure in heart" in his equation about: seeing "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." What does this tell us? First of all, "heart" as the biblical writers use the term, is not just about our feelings and emotions. The heart in biblical understanding is the center of our being. It is the control room of all that we are and do. To have that control center pure means not just to have it morally correct, but to have it properly focused. It is to have it be unmixed and undivided. Just like it's hard to walk or drive with double vision, so it's hard to live with a heart—the control center of our life—that is divided and trying to lead us in two different directions.

C. It's why the psalmist prays: "Give me an undivided heart that I may fear your name" (86:11). It's why Jesus would later say, "No one can serve two masters . . . You cannot serve both God and money" (Ma. 6:24). And it's why James, the brother of Jesus writes: "Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded" (Jas. 4:8). Such double-mindedness is fueled by idolatry, as Psalm 24 explains: "Who may ascend the mountain of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place? The one who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not trust in an idol or swear by a false god" (Ps. 24:3-4). Idolatry divides our heart and clouds our vision so that we cannot see God clearly.

D. And this is where John the Baptist joins the conversation. The son of Zechariah the priest and his wife Elizabeth, John was an ancient hipster, dressed in camel's hair and leather (the Carhartt of his day), and munching on bugs and honey, John not only looked like one of the prophets of old, but he sounded like one, too. While these fellows hadn't been heard from for over 400 years, both the last of them – Malachi, and the most prolific of them – Isaiah, had foretold that one day a messenger would come who would be just like one of the oldest and greatest of them – Elijah, and that he would come to prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. Thinking that this very well could be he, the people streamed out into the wilderness to hear him and be washed clean by him.

D. His message was, first-of all, that in Jesus, the King had come and his kingdom had dawned. And, secondly, that to experience the good life of this kingdom, one needed to purify their heart, one needed to repent, as John put it. In essence, John was encouraging the people to take a heart test, to tell the truth (also a way to understand "repentance") and identify the idols in their lives, idols which threatened to divide their hearts. "Give me an undivided heart," was the prayer John would have been encouraging the people to pray, "purify our hearts" that we might see all that God is and all that God has in mind for us.

This project of purification is life-long! It might help to think about our own idols in the following way:

I – Items: The things we have or own which lead us to believe that if we have them we'll be well off.

D – Duties: The things we do that we believe will bring us ultimate significance and meaning.

O – Others: Our relationships that we believe will provide us with lasting love and security.

L – Longings: Those things around which our hope tends to focus.

S – Sufferings: Believing that our pain, or what has been done to us, defines us and brings us meaning.

When any of these things become ultimate, our hearts become divided, and our vision of God clouded.

Or maybe we could look at it like this. As the Baptist's ministry continued, his disciples began to notice that the disciples of Jesus were becoming greater in number. John explained that this was actually the way it should be, saying of Jesus: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (Jn. 3:30). Author Craig Blomberg comments that when he heard this verse as a child, he imagined Jesus growing bigger and bigger while John the Baptist began to shrink! Which is not a bad image to carry with us, for the more the kingdom of God gets ahold of us, the taller Jesus will become, the smaller we will get, and the more clearly we will be able to see the living God.

So, let's bring those idolatries to the table of the Lord, tell the truth about where our hearts are focused, and ask for God's purifying power so that Jesus becomes bigger and bigger in our lives.