

PURITY AND THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

F. Aster Barnwell

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God,” says the sixth Beatitude. If we subject this Beatitude to its customary interpretation, we might find this idea of purity unattainable, reserved only for the saint or mystic. But what is meant here is another understanding of purity. This purity is a state of clarity. Thus, “Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God” is really saying that it is only when we become clear in our hearts, when we’ve sorted out all our jumbled emotions and come to a place of stillness that we can become aware of the Divine Presence.

Purity and Faith

If faith is the propulsion system of the spiritual life, purity is its transmission mechanism. Purity affects our capacity to interphase with a larger reality because how we meet the challenges of life is determined by our level of purity. Do we regress into helplessness or do we rise to the occasion by tapping into here-to-fore unutilized resources? While faith deals with our capacity to discern Universal principles in action, purity deals with our readiness to receive that for which we are seeking. It defines our posture before God, whether it is one of defensiveness or confidence. In other words, purity is the measure of our capacity to receive God’s love. It is our sense of being in the right place. It is one’s sense of justification, of being in tune with life.

Purity is a relative concept as there is no objective standard by which one can rule on another’s level of purity. It is something for each one to know within him or herself. For it is that condition of being at one with the truth of who you are. When you experience yourself in this manner, you will know that you have done all that you can do. You can look at your life and honestly and truthfully feel that there is nothing you could change to make your life different. On the contrary, you feel that you have touched something that is uniquely you which you can offer to Life. And it is this knowledge which enables you to stand open before Life without the need to protect or defend yourself. There is no self-reproach; you have no excuses or a defence prepared because you do not feel the need for one.

At a feeling level, purity is our sense of justification, our sense of being a stakeholder in Life. And it is this feeling of being a stakeholder in Life that we are able to experience how it feels to know that the Universe bodes no ill towards us.

Invoking God

Because purity creates a state of being open and receptive, it is the ideal condition for invoking God. The heart that does not feel pure will resist all God’s efforts to draw one to Himself as we become suspicious, defensive, protective. Like the errant child who flees at the approach of the parent, fearing that some misdeed has been uncovered, such is our response to God’s approach should we lack purity. Sometimes God approaches the soul by

removing the barriers that exist between Him and his creations. If purity is absent, when one is touched by the purifying fire of Divine Love one immediately treats the event as a negative invasion, an assault against which one must defend oneself.

Without purity, we cannot stand the presence of God, because without it, we can never come to a point of inner surrender. Why? Because we will feel that there is unfinished business, that there's something left for us to do before we're ready. No moment ever feels right for an encounter with God. The feeling we get is akin to showing up for an examination knowing that we haven't studied, or applying for a job knowing fully well that our qualifications fall far short.

When we experience the absence of purity, we feel defensive. If something unpleasant happens to us the first response is to shut down by being resentful. How can we learn to discern the difference between God's Love and God's wrath, to know the difference between when we are being called from when we are being "punished"? The distinction is important, for if we feel that we are being punished we might resort to all sorts of defensive strategies. It takes a deep sense of trust to discern the drawing power of God even in our most painful disappointments, a trust which can only manifest if we feel blameless, which is to say, pure. If we are not in a state of purity, even God's deepest love can be experienced as something terrible, to be defended against. Purity, being our sense of our own integrity, becomes like our spiritual immune system.

Unbreakable Bonds

With purity, nothing is able to separate us from the Love of God, and we are able to find the Love of God in every event that happens to us. For with it, unworthiness—and the defensiveness that invariably accompanies this—gives place to an overwhelming confidence. Even in suffering, we are able to fall into our pain without bitterness or regret, accepting it simply for what it is. This confidence emerges from our sense of God as our all, a sense that we are in the Body of God. Whatever happens takes place because God must deem it necessary for His Body, which includes us.

One year, in a Christmas newsletter I sent to friends, I disclosed that one of the mental images of God that has spoken to me over the years is that of "the Great Disappointer." I explained that I saw the hand of God in all my major disappointments—illnesses, lost loves, frustrated ambitions, and so on. However, I explained that I saw these disappointments as means by which God was separating me from whatever I had placed my faith in to draw me to Himself. One of my friends was alarmed by this image, which she found "dark" and negative, and wrote back to comfort me. From my side, I thought I was offering my friends a glimpse of my evolving faith, one which was not rooted in any reward systems. This faith had evolved independent of expectations that something in my future would validate all my past experiences and compensate for my disappointments. In a way, I was trying to share a faith that rested only in my perception of Truth, rather than on things which were seen or expected. This is a faith which exists in itself, which emerges as the clear sky after a storm.

As I became detached from my attachments (to happiness, success, etc.) I was finding my faith in life deepening.

Nothing to Push Against

Purity and faith complement each other, for with purity, we have nothing to push against, or defend ourselves against, enabling us to stay open, receptive, and non-judgmental. This environment will allow our faith to reach full flowering, making us capable of seeing the love of God in every event that happens to us. It can even be said that purity gives wings to our faith, making it so powerful that it can make a believer even of our pain. Because when we are in pain, we are susceptible to doubt, but since purity is what turns fear into love, even our pain will bring us the means of our transformation.

Question for Contemplation

Here's a question for contemplation: Which is the greater faith, that kind of faith which holds out for a miracle, or the kind that is able to find the miracle in what has already been given? In so many respects, it's how we feel about our relationship with God that determines our answer.

© F. Aster Barnwell

Contact: aster@AsterBarnwell.com

April 12th, 2012