

Followers of the Way

What the Lord requires – Purity

Philip Quenby, 3 March 2024

Job 25:1-6, 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1

This is the fourth in our sermon series looking at the question: what does the LORD require of us? (Micah 6:8). So far, we have covered obedience, righteousness, and justice. Today's theme is purity.

The word purity appears only once in the entirety of the Old Testament, when God uses it in the context of Israel breaking covenant with Him, and asks, "How long will they be incapable of purity?" (Hosea 8:5). And it occurs only four times in the New Testament, in the writings of Paul and Peter. But we should not let these relatively few mentions of purity as a noun fool us into thinking this quality is of anything less than fundamental importance to God. The Scriptures tell us, God's "eyes are too pure to look on evil" (Habakkuk 1:13). Purity is one of His essential characteristics, and He desires His people to reflect this aspect of Himself, every bit as much as any of His other attributes. The Bible may not use purity very often, but the words pure, purify and purification appear frequently. There is plenty, too, about the washing, cleansing, and consecration that were part of Israel's physical purification rituals, which in turn provide pictures of the spiritual purification God wants to see in His people. All these things are central to biblical teaching on what kind of God the LORD is, and what He requires of humankind.

With an eye on all this, I want to look **first** at seven areas where the Bible tells us purity is essential:

- For worshipping God;
- For serving God;
- For seeing God
- For approaching God;
- For the renewing of our minds;
- For living the Christian life;
- For readying ourselves for eternity.

Second, in examining the first point, we will answer the question posed by Job's comforter, Bildad: "How can one born of woman be pure?" (Job 25:4).

And **third**, I want to consider what we might need to do at this point – as individuals or collectively as Church – to purify ourselves and make ourselves ready for what God wants to do in us and through us in this next phase of His end-time activity.

Where purity is essential

Purity is essential for worshipping God. We see a physical expression of this in the materials Moses was told to use for the things employed in Tabernacle worship. God repeatedly emphasised that “pure gold” was needed for:

- The ark of the covenant (Exodus 25:11, 25:17, 37:2, 37:6);
- The table for the Bread of the Presence (Exodus 25:24, 25:29, 37:11, 37:16);
- The lampstand (Exodus 25:31, 25:36, 25:38, 25:39, 37:17, 37:22, 37:23, 37:24, 39:37);
- The high priest’s clothing – ephod, breast-piece, turban, and robes (Exodus 28:14, 28:22, 28:36, 39:15, 39:25, 39:30);
- The altar (Exodus 30:3, 37:26).

Purity was also required in the ingredients for the incense. (Exodus 30:34, 30:35, 37:29).

When he came to build a temple to the LORD in Jerusalem, Solomon followed these same instructions God had given to Moses: “he overlaid the inside with pure gold” (1 Kings 6:20, 2 Chronicles 3:4), made “lampstands of pure gold” (1 Kings 7:49, 2 Chronicles 4:20), “pure gold basins” (1 Kings 7:50), “pure gold wick trimmers, sprinkling bowls, dishes and censers” (2 Chronicles 4:22).

All these physical things, of course, are only signs and shadows. The spiritual reality they point to is by far superior, and this reality is rooted in a proper appreciation of the character, Word, and ways of God: “The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb.” (Psalm 19:10-11). So, we see that the fear of the LORD and adherence to all His ordinances (His laws, decrees, commandments) are essential.

Lamenting in a later generation over Israel’s false worship, and pointing to a time when true worship will be offered, God says, “Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar! I am not pleased with you,’ says the LORD Almighty, ‘and I will accept no offering from your hands. My name will be great among the nations, from the rising to the setting of the sun. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to my name, because my name will be great among the nations,’ says the LORD Almighty.” (Malachi 1:10-11).

What sobering words these are, as we see the state of what calls itself Church in this nation. How we need to humble ourselves and repent, seeking renewed purity in our worship by standing on the full, unadulterated Word of God, walking in the fear of the LORD, and conforming our ways as best we can to His.

Purity is essential for serving God. Our service of God involves using body, mind, soul, and spirit. It is possible for our spirit to be born again (and therefore sanctified: Romans 15:16), but for us not to have brought mind, soul, and body into submission to Christ. Achieving this is part of what “[working] out our salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12) involves. It does not (will not) happen automatically, and is something we need to work on progressively in cooperation with God, examining ourselves honestly and measuring ourselves against the plumb line of the truth of His Word. “There are ... those who are pure in their own eyes and yet are not cleansed of their filth” (Proverbs

30:11-12), which should cause us to reflect carefully on the degree to which we might be allowing the things of this world to ensnare us – not necessarily in outright sin, but in self-satisfaction, self-absorption, compromise, apathy, passivity, and lukewarmness.

The apostle Peter puts it like this: “Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.” (1 Peter 2:1-2).

Now, we should not be discouraged by what might sound as though it is a task that is beyond us. We can and should devote ourselves to the service of God from the moment of our conversion, and He will surely delight in what we offer Him from good motives. If we think we must attain sinless perfection before we can serve, we will never do anything. But all the same, the greater the degree to which body, mind, soul, and spirit are brought into submission to Christ, the more worthwhile our service will be in His eyes and the more we will build things of lasting value.

God does not want us to tread water in the Christian life, and be content to remain in the same place spiritually. Instead, he wants us to grow in Him and bear much fruit for His kingdom. Paul tells us later in 2 Corinthians to “examine [ourselves] to see whether [we] are in the faith” (2 Corinthians 13:5), and so we should give thought to the condition of our mind, soul, and body, as well as of our spirit:

The **mind** governs our thoughts. “The LORD detests the thoughts of the wicked, but those of the pure are pleasing to him.” (Proverbs 15:26). We need an effort of mind and will to “take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.” (2 Corinthians 10:5).

The **soul** governs our will, which in turn determines the behaviour of our **body**. “Even a child is known by his actions, by whether his conduct is pure and right.” (Proverbs 20:11). Actions tell us about our overall spiritual condition, so we should be alert to impurity in what we do. The **body** is a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19, see also 2 Corinthians 6:16), and we should treat it as such.

Though we associate the heart with emotions, in Hebrew thought it, too, is a seat of the will, and gives rise to action by the **body**, for “out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks.” (Matthew 12:34, Luke 6:45). Our culture encourages us to follow our heart, but the Bible says, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and exceedingly wicked. Who can know it?” (Jeremiah 17:9). We need to be as honest as we can about what is in our heart, for “He who loves a pure heart and whose speech is gracious will have the king for his friend.” (Proverbs 22:11). The King of kings and Lord of lords calls us his friends (John 15:15), and we should do our best to be worthy of this honour.

Working with God to bring mind, soul, and body into submission to Christ will enable us increasingly to “serve in the new way of the Spirit” (Romans 7:6), offering our “bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God” (Romans 12:1).

Purity is essential for seeing God. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus speaks a series of blessings in which He says, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” (Matthew 5:8). The Bible twice affirms of God, “To the pure you show yourself pure” (2 Samuel 22:27, Psalm 18:26). Jesus’ brother James advises, “Draw nigh to God and he will draw nigh to you.” (James 4:8, KJV). As we draw closer to God in purity, so He will reveal to us more of Himself.

After David committed adultery with Bathsheba and was complicit in the murder of her husband Uriah, the king pleaded with God, “Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me” (Psalm 51:11). He was in anguish of soul, conscious of no longer being as close to God as he once was. To regain this relationship, he prayed, “Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.” (Psalm 51:10). David, “a man after [God’s] own heart” (1 Samuel 13:14), confessed and repented, seeking forgiveness from the LORD so he could walk in renewed purity.

The Bible speaks of sin, iniquity, and transgression. Sin is missing the mark. It is part of the condition of fallen humanity, and we all do it. Iniquity is more serious, since it speaks of moral depravity. And transgression is more serious still, because it involves a deliberate setting of our face against the Word and ways of God. Whether we are guilty of sin, iniquity, transgression, or a combination of all three, we need to confess and repent before Almighty God as soon as we can, allowing Him in His goodness and mercy to forgive the wrong, treat it as if it had never been, and restore us to a place where we can again walk with Him and seek His face. The atoning sacrifice of Christ through His death on the cross and His subsequent resurrection make all this possible.

Paul records God’s wonderful promise, “I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.” (2 Corinthians 6:16, see also Leviticus 26:12, Jeremiah 32:38, Ezekiel 37:27). This looks back to Old Testament prophecies of the coming of the Messiah, and forward to the second coming of Christ, but it is also something we can (to a degree) lay hold of now. Through the imputed righteousness of Christ, we can walk in purity with our Maker.

Jesus, of course, is the answer to the question that perplexed Job’s comforters and other Old Testament writers: “How can one born of woman be pure?” (Job 25:4), “How can a young man keep his way pure?” (Psalm 119:9), “Who can say, ‘I have kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin?’” (Proverbs 20:9). Humanly speaking, we know the answer is: no-one. But the New Testament explains how God squares the circle between justice and mercy: because Jesus “provided purification for sins” (Hebrews 1:3) and “has appeared once and for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself” (Hebrews 9:23-28). John, the disciple Jesus loved, says, “if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, His Son, purifies us from all sin.” (1 John 1:7). And, later in the same letter, “we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.” (1 John 3:3). All this, because (as Peter said at the Jerusalem council) “God, who knows the heart ... purified [our] hearts by faith.” (Acts 15:9).

In our Scripture passage for today, Paul concludes, “Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness in reverence for God.” (2 Corinthians 7:1).

Purity is essential for approaching God. When Moses stood before the burning bush, God said, “Do not come any closer ... Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.” (Exodus 3:5, see also Joshua 5:15). Taking off the sandals is a picture of humility, but since it involves divesting ourselves of what has touched the dust of the ground, it also points to setting aside what is commonplace, every-day, or impure. Wherever God is, is holy since He is holy. The holy and the unholy cannot co-exist. Neither can the pure and impure, sacred, and profane. Hence the need for purity if we are to approach God. As David sang, “Who can ascend the hill of the LORD? He who has clean hands and a pure heart.” (Psalm 24:4).

Paul writes, “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols?” (2 Corinthians 6:14-16). Belial means worthlessness in Hebrew, and in Jewish tradition is the name of a demonic principality particularly associated with fornication, lust, and sexual perversion.

These rhetorical questions are the platform from which Paul quotes various Old Testament Scriptures in 2 Corinthians 6:17-18. We will come to what these mean in the context of Church in a moment. But for now, just note they can also have an individual application. The wheat and the tares grow together, and in this fallen world we cannot avoid at least some contact with what is impure and unholy, whether this be foul language in the workplace or on the street, the dubious conduct of family members, and so on. But this does not mean we should deliberately put ourselves in the way of such things where we have a choice. We can control what television programmes we watch, what kind of people we mix with in our free time, how we spend our leisure, and much else. Wherever we can choose purity, and avoid being unequally yoked, we should do so. Which brings us to the next point.

Purity is essential for the renewing of our minds. Paul says, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing, and perfect will.” (Romans 12:2). God’s desire is to renew our minds, and to conform us more and more to the likeness of Christ. But as with so much else, this is a joint endeavour between us and Him. There is not much use in the LORD working to renew our mind if at the same time we are busy pumping into it all sorts of filth and nonsense. We need to make a conscious effort to cooperate with Him in the renewal process, and to hold onto the spiritual gains He has made available to us. Solomon cautions, “As a dog returns to its vomit, so a fool repeats his folly” (Proverbs 26:11), and no follower of Christ should be like that.

As so often, Paul gives intensely practical advice anyone can follow: “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 upon such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me – put it into practice.” (Philippians 4:8-9). Note the two-stage process, first of thinking and then of doing. Christian life in all its fullness is not intended to be solely an interior one of contemplation, but one that involves integration of body, mind, soul, and spirit, and hence requires action. (Even those who choose the contemplative path in a monastery or nunnery still need to work as part of the daily life of their community.)

Purity is essential for living the Christian life. Paul’s advice to Timothy was to “keep yourself pure (1 Timothy 5:22), “flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart.” (2 Timothy 2:22). Purity is essential to:

Seeing the way God sees: “To the pure, all things are pure.” (Titus 1:15).

Thinking with the mind of Christ: “But wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.” (James 3:17).

Feeling with God’s heart: Paul says “love ... comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.” (1 Timothy 1:5).

Being motivated by godly intentions: “Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart.” (1 Peter 1:22).

Walking the way God wants: “Because I love your commands more than gold, more than pure gold, and because I consider all your precepts right, I hate every wrong path.” (Psalm 119:127-128).

Acting as God desires: “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” (James 1:27).

Receiving what God longs to give: “Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.” (Psalm 73:1).

Paul prayed for the Philippians to “be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God.” (Philippians 1:10-11). To this end, he urged them to “do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life” (Philippians 2:14-16).

If we see, think, feel, are motivated, walk, act, and receive as God intends, we cannot help but shine like stars. The presence of the Holy Spirit will radiate from us and people will give glory to God for what He does in us and through us. As God revealed to Daniel, “Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness like stars for ever and ever.” (Daniel 12:3). This is the eternal destiny we should be stepping into right here and now.

Purity is essential for readying ourselves for eternity. During our time on earth, we have a chance to start preparing for a wonderful future in the “new heaven and ... new earth” (Revelation 21:1). The New Jerusalem will be a “city of pure gold, as pure as glass” (Revelation 21:18) and “the great street of [this] city [will be] of pure gold” (Revelation 21:21). Only what is pure will be allowed in this place, and the more we strive for purity in this life, the easier our passage to the next will be.

Where separation is required

So much for personal purity. But what about the Church? One well-known Bible teacher has defined the purity of the Church as its degree of freedom from wrong doctrine and conduct, and its degree of conformity to God’s revealed will for the Church, as expressed in twelve areas:

- Biblical doctrine (right preaching of the Word)
- Proper use of the sacraments (or ordinances)
- Right use of Church discipline
- Genuine worship
- Effective prayer
- Effective witness
- Effective fellowship
- Biblical Church government
- Spiritual power in ministry
- Personal holiness of life among members
- Care for the poor
- Love for Christ

(See Wayne Grudem in *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 2003)

It is not for us to sit in judgment on anyone, but we are called to judge in the sense of rightly discerning between right and wrong; true or false; godly and ungodly. Viewing the landscape of denominational churches in our nation, we are surely forced to conclude that, with a relatively few noble exceptions at local level, we do not score very well against the measures I have just mentioned. Christ’s goal for His Church is “that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.” (Ephesians 5:26-27). As things presently stand, we are doing all too little to cooperate with Him in this process.

Writing to the believers in Corinth, Paul said, “I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him. But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent’s cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ.” (2 Corinthians 11:2-3). Across the nation, we see minds being led astray in exactly this fashion.

Paul issues a challenge that is as much for present-day Britain as for his time: “‘Therefore come out of them and be separate,’ says the LORD. ‘Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you.’” (2 Corinthians 6:17). This echoes the call in Isaiah, “Depart, depart, go out

from there! Touch no unclean thing! Come out from it and be pure, you who carry the vessels of the LORD.” (Isaiah 52:11). So, too, the voice from heaven that says of Babylon the Great, “Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues” (Revelation 18:4). God cannot be mocked, and judgment is coming for our apostasy, as Church and nation. The LORD’s ultimate purpose in this is redemptive – to purify His bride and to call our nation back to Himself. What will unfold in the days ahead will not be pretty, but He wants to position His remnant to be His instrument for picking up the pieces afterwards: which means we need to distance ourselves from a judgment that does not belong to us, but at the same time to prepare ourselves to be carriers of His purity back into the world around us. So, let us look to ourselves, and work with Him in this.

God’s desire is that “‘I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters,’ says the LORD Almighty.” (2 Corinthians 6:18). Judgment must come, but let us work, pray, and believe for what lies on the other side of it – and be as ready as we can to move in purity, holiness, and power when God says, Go!

Amen