

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## The Problem with Purity - in an Impure World

I remember a few months ago we had a small leak from a water pipe that came through the garage roof. Once it had been mended, and the plasterer had finished the ceiling, I thought that I would just have to paint a small area to match it with the rest of the ceiling. It would only be a ten minute job! Unfortunately, once I had painted the mended patch, the rest looked a dirty yellow and the contrast was too great to just be left. So a whole morning later the complete garage ceiling was a pure brilliant white. I hadn't realised just how off-white the ceiling had been until it was compared to the real thing!

Today, we start a series looking at the difficulties there are in living a genuine Christian life. It should come as no surprise to us that to live a life that is true to Jesus is not going to be easy. Time and again throughout the New Testament there are warnings about hardship and suffering, about persecution and the need to bear a cross. Too often we imagine this only applies to being locked up in prison in faraway countries. Perhaps today we shall come to see that the biggest struggles are those that are internal, where we have to conquer our own wrong attitudes and actions, and live in a way that is a real struggle on a daily basis.

This morning, I want to look at the subject of purity in three different ways, loosely based upon the three different words used in the original Greek language for purity, and to look at some helps to maintaining a personal purity. You see, just like my garage ceiling, over a period of time we inevitably become soiled by our very existence in this world. Without even having to set foot outside our front door, we are bombarded by ideas and actions that dull the conscience and lower our standards. In an attempt to maintain a purity and relationship with God that was undefiled by the world, the monastics withdrew from much of general life. However, they found that even in their secluded atmosphere, the problems with purity were just as real, and their ability to effectively serve Christ were greatly diminished. Before we go any further, let us clear our minds of the notion that if only we could have less to do with the society we live in, then we could be more pure. Who, more than the Lord, associated with tax collectors and sinners? Yet there was none who maintained a greater personal purity than He.

Intentionally, then we start by looking at internal purity. The Greek word "*katharos*" means to be cleansed or purged. Our English word cathartic – a strong release of emotion – is derived from it. Too often we think that purity is all about externals. Oh, I don't drink, I don't smoke, I'm faithful to my wife so I must be a pretty pure sort of chap. But this is to entirely miss the point, and frankly, sets far too low a standard. If we are to lead a truly pure life then we must begin by looking at what fills our minds and our emotions for this is by far the most common word used for purity. We shall begin by looking at a few examples of its use in the New Testament.

- "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" Matthew 5:8.
- "Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith" 1 Timothy 1:5.
- "To the pure all things are pure, but to those who are defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure" Titus 1:15.
- "Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart" 1 Peter 1:22.

We can see immediately how closely the subject of purity is tied to the heart and our affections. I think it must be true to say that if we loved the Lord more we would find the matter of purity a good deal less difficult. It is also probably true, that those who are most conscious of impurity are those who love Him most. The inevitable question we need to ask ourselves, then, is what will help us purify our hearts so that we can become pure internally.

The story is told of a young boy who went to the beach with his grandpa. The old man could clearly see that something was troubling the boy, and with time coaxed from him the admission that when he read the Bible he didn't understand much of it and, frankly, it was quite boring. When his grandpa didn't say anything straight away, the boy began to wonder if he didn't understand his problems. They built a sandcastle and dug a moat around it, before the grandpa told the boy to run to the sea, and fill his bucket with water so that they could fill the moat and make a proper castle. So off the boy went to the water's edge and filled his bucket. On the way back, however, water slopped over the edge and ran from a crack in the base of the bucket. By the time he got back, there was hardly any water left, and when this was tipped into the moat it soon seeped into the sand. Again and again, the grandpa sent the boy back to

the sea to fetch more water, until worn out and frustrated, the boy exclaimed, "I'll never be able to carry enough water in this bucket to fill the moat!" "Ah yes", replied grandpa, "but look how clean the bucket has become with your trying!" He then went on to explain that so often we are all like that bucket and the sea is like the Bible. Very often we may read it and feel that it has done us no good. Perhaps we may think that it has little relevance to the particularly troublesome situation we are going through. But the Spirit performs His own work in our lives through the reading of His word, and though we may not realise it, our minds are cleansed by the regular exposure to the Divine mind expressed in the Bible.

Very often, without even realising it, we are taking in wrong thoughts and principles. As we read the newspaper and are exposed to wrong actions, as we watch TV and listen to wrong language, as we walk past a shop and are encouraged to be dissatisfied with what we have, we are constantly being exposed to what falls short of God's standard. Perhaps, like me, you have been at a church service and suddenly found your mind filled with all sorts of things – work, family etc. rather than with the purpose of the service. Immediately, my mind has become impure. Perhaps you hear of growth at another church, or another believer doing something that you don't like and immediately the mind is filled with thoughts of jealousy and anger. How easy it is for our affections and our minds to be filled with what is not right! If there is one thing that will keep us from this, it is saturating our minds with the Bible. I'm not talking here about deliberately studying in depth a particular subject, but just reading and rereading His word. I have vague memories of my chemistry lessons at school when we made saturated solutions. We added a solid to a liquid until no more would dissolve. But when we heated it up, we found that it all dissolved and more could be added. We need to saturate our minds with the Bible so that when the "heat" of circumstances tries us, there is still an abundance of the Word of God to fill our minds rather than our fallen nature's thoughts. Make no mistake; our minds are not a vacuum. If it is not the Bible filling them, then it will be our old nature with all its wrong thoughts. By now you may be thinking along the lines that all that sounds very good in theory but "I just don't have time". And therein is the problem. We don't really want to be pure all that much. There are no short cuts to spirituality. Like any discipline, it takes hard work and a real commitment. That time watching T.V. or reading the paper could always be sacrificed. I could settle for a lower standard of living and work less overtime. Real choices have to be made if we want to have a pure heart and mind. Without these we can be sure that any other form of purity will be cold and burdensome. In Matthew, Jesus told us the reward for purity – seeing God. Now it is true that all those who belong to Him will one day see Him (1 John 3:2). But I think that what Jesus was talking about related much more to the here and now. Imagine if we were to find out that God Himself was to be paying a visit to the place where I live. I would change all my plans, book a day off work, and make sure I was there – just to see Him! Well if we really believe what Jesus said, then we know that by pursuing purity we shall see Him. And it is by filling our time with reading His word that we can maintain the purity that He expects. If only I had painted a patch on my garage ceiling every year I would have seen how impure it had become. There was just nothing to alert me to the fact that it was no longer a pure white. His word will always act as a reminder when my heart and mind start to become impure, as well as giving us the ability to rectify the problem.

But let us now move on to the second of the three words used in the New Testament for purity – *hagnos*. We shall use this word to remind us of the need for external purity. Behind this word is the idea of "free from contamination" and comes from the same root as the word for holiness, or being set apart for God.

Without wishing to offend my local water company, the water they send through the taps is really impure. Of course, from years of experience, I know it tastes great and will do me no harm so it is completely safe to use. But if we were to use it at work in one of our big analysers, where we measure things like potassium, glucose and cholesterol then we would get all sorts of wrong answers, because of the impurities in the water – it is definitely not pure water. So we have to filter it in several ways ourselves. That's fine until it comes to making up primary standards and measuring trace metals where even the tiniest impurity would give us the wrong answer. So that water that we thought was pure has to be really filtered and treated. You see, it all depends on how closely you look at a thing as to whether or not you think it is pure. Actions and words that I might use in general company at work might seem quite inappropriate in the presence of my mother! But for the believer, all our actions are viewed under the microscope of an absolutely pure God. Let us look, then, at some of the verses that mention this kind of purity.

- "Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy – meditate on these things" Philippians 4:8.
- "Do not lay hands on anyone hastily, nor share in other people's sins; keep yourself pure" 1 Timothy 5:22.
- "And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure" 1 John 3:3.

However we look at life, we must do so with the realisation that we do everything under the constant scrutiny of our heavenly Father, who is always looking for an excuse to bless. If we accept that Bible reading is the key to keeping the heart pure, then God given service is the key to keeping the actions pure. I am reminded of Joseph in Potiphar's household. When his master's wife tried to seduce Joseph, he ran away. He didn't try to explain why it was not right or try to ignore the situation, he just ran away. I think it must be difficult to commit fornication while you are running!

Action saved him. Conversely it was when kings went to war, but David was taking it easy, that he fell for Bathsheba and became an adulterer, mass murderer and liar. There is a saying that "the devil finds work for idle hands". Especially in these days when so few Christians seem to be really committed to serving Jesus, we need to fill our time with acts of service, taking on responsibility and looking for new avenues of profitable activity. Now activity for the sake of activity is not right. But if we truly ask the Lord to open up for us ways in which we can serve Him, then it will not be long before He gives us something to do. I believe that activity will help in two different ways to keep us pure. Firstly, it really is a time thing. If I am busy doing something then I will have less time to read a book that isn't all that helpful, or watch a programme that contains worldly morals. Secondly, I think that as we are involved in the Lord's work our consciences become more finely attuned to what is right and what is not. If we expect the Holy Spirit to work through us, I am sure that He will first work in us to make us fit for His service. This process of constant purification is one that will take a whole lifetime. In just the same way that we purify water at work, where first the very large contaminants are removed to make quite pure water, then the smaller impurities are removed to make pure water, and then the really small impurities are filtered out to make ultra pure water, so the Holy Spirit will constantly seek to purify us. We ought not to be surprised when we find ourselves uncomfortable with thoughts or actions that we once found acceptable. We ought to be worried, however, when we find ourselves happy with those things we once knew to be wrong!

Finally, we come to our third word used for purity in the New Testament and we shall think of this in terms of doctrinal purity. The Greek word "*eilikrines*" and it is only translated as pure in 2 Peter 3:1. It is thought that the word suggests the idea of being tested by the sunlight. Let us then read 2 Peter 3:1-2. "Beloved, I now write to you this second epistle (in both of which I stir up your pure minds by way of reminder), that you may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us, the apostles of the Lord and Saviour."

Here, Peter would remind his readers of what they knew already through what had been written down by the prophets and apostles. It was this that was to fill their minds. We must never get away from what the Bible teaches. We must never add to it, going beyond what it actually says and imposing rules of our own. We must never disregard part of it, believing it to be out of date or not relevant to us today. As Paul could say to Timothy, 2 Timothy 3:16: "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness." The Psalmist could write in Psalm 119:105, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." Each one of us needs to ask the important question, "Does what I believe and practise match up completely with what the Bible says?" When the light of His word shines upon my beliefs, is there anything that, like a beetle whose rock is moved, would run from the light? In this regard the company that we keep is all important. I was born and raised in Liverpool, and for that I am truly thankful. In fact for all but three years of my life, I have lived in Liverpool. So you might have thought I should have a reasonably strong scouse accent. However, my parents did not have the privilege of being native Liverpudlians and so at home, in my formative years, I did not pick up the accent. No doubt if they had spoken with the broad local accent, then today you would have been listening to this with a generous scouse dialect. You see, even in natural things, the company that we keep has a profound effect upon the sort of person that we are.

More so in spiritual things. If from the beginning of my spiritual life I have been brought up to believe that black is white, then it ought to be no surprise when I assume that everyone else thinks black is white. We ought to be very patient with one another, when we find others do not see things exactly the way that we do. However, as we proceed to spiritual maturity, we need to seriously look to the scriptures only, and see if what we believe and what we practise matches what we read there. The greatest testimony any local church can have is that they really love their Bibles. Sadly, I sometimes see folk coming out of church and there is hardly a Bible to be seen.

The example of Saul is a solemn one. We might be hasty and write the first king of Israel off as a poor king, but that would be simplistic. In many ways he was a good man. If we were to think about where he went wrong, however, we might have cited the time he went to a witch, or the time when he didn't obey God in defeating the Amalekites. However, we read that the time when God resolved to take the kingdom away from Saul and his family was when he wanted to make offerings to God! Outwardly, he was engaged in spiritual activity, but his actions were impure, because he was doing something that God had said only the Levites could do – and he was not a Levite. It is possible to do a good thing in the wrong way. If only he had kept company with the Levites, he might never have lost the favour of God!

For us today, we need to make very sure that the Christians that I meet with really love and obey the Word of God, and that it is accurately taught, it stands up to the light of spiritual scrutiny. Where it doesn't, then we need to find spiritual company that will help us to be doctrinally pure. For we can be sure that, like Saul, if we get our beliefs and teaching wrong, then we will sooner or later get our actions wrong.

In closing, Paul had some challenging words to Timothy. We read then in his second letter, chapter 2, verse 19: "Nevertheless the solid foundation of God stands, having this seal: 'The Lord knows those who are His', and, 'Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity.'" Purity is not a luxury that we might aim towards. It is a necessity that we need to actively pursue. Whether it is our inner thoughts and emotions, or whether it is our outer

actions, we need to ensure that they are set apart to God and clean, suitable for His presence. What we believe must be able to stand up to the full scrutiny of the entire Word of God. If all this sounds like a tall order, it is! And yet it is possible. God never asks us to do something that He does not equip us for. As we have seen this morning, we have the indwelling Holy Spirit to empower us to live a life of purity. By constant, daily reading of the Bible, by active service that fills my time and takes my energy, and by keeping company with those who love His word and faithfully teach it, then we have real helps to enable us to be pure in an impure world. It is not going to get any easier. A leopard cannot change its spots. This world will not suddenly become a place that makes it easy to live a pure life. Therefore, we must be energetic in our pursuit of purity, for His name's sake.

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