

The Beatitudes (6)

'Blessed are the pure in heart: for they will see God.'

One of the greatest traps into which people can fall is thinking that an external display of goodness and outward conformity to the teaching of religion is, by itself, enough and all that matters. It was of course the thinking in orthodox circles during the time the Lord was on earth, and He outspokenly denounced it on many occasions. Then people thought that so long as they observed the outward rituals correctly they were righteous before God and holy before men. For them the religious life was outward show and all on the surface. And though we might censure such foolishness yet the tendency to think so remains with us today. We too can come to feel that acts of charity and external obedience are in themselves sufficient. For the Church goer the temptation is to think that ceremonial observances make them religious.

But this of course is not so. And as much as people of New Testament times needed to be taught this, so do we. The Jews worried themselves about ceremonial washing and bodily purity. What in fact really mattered was the purity and cleanliness of the person within. We also have this same tendency to concentrate on external things when in fact what matters is the quality of the thoughts and affections we have within. Just as they needed the teaching of the sixth Beatitude, so do we. 'Blessed are the pure in heart: for they will see God.'

None of the other Beatitudes so confronts us with the reality of genuine discipleship and the discipline of the regenerate life than this one does. It has indeed been called the most demanding of them all. For what is spoken of is the removal of evil from our thoughts and affections and the cleansing of the person we really are within. It challenges us to look at ourselves, not in terms of the person we are in the sight of others, but in terms of what we love and cherish, desire and seek after. It raises with us the question of our repentance and the effort we are presently making to put away from us the self regarding thoughts and evil desires that so often move us. It speaks of something which is both beautiful and attainable though, at the same time, a lot of effort is unquestionably required.

No one is born pure of heart. To the contrary, the will with which we are born - for it is so obviously the will which is meant - is corrupted by bad hereditary tendencies reinforced in many cases by disorderly influences and a false environment.

Swedenborg wrote 'Of his parent, every man is born into the evils of the love of self and the world', (*New Jerusalem and its Heavenly Doctrine* 175); evils to which we continually incline and which, before reformation and regeneration, are always there. As has been said of us in this condition, 'our orientation is all wrong. Everything is measured by the little yardstick of self interest, and seen under the dim light of a self centred intellect.' (*Charles Hall, The Blessed Way, page 75*). If we do good it tends to be on the basis of how and in what way it will benefit ourselves and cause us to be seen by others. Self is at the centre of everything.

But this is not how it always has to be. We are continually being exhorted to alter the whole situation. The words of Isaiah come to us, "Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do well." So too the cry of John the Baptist calling us all to repentance, and the teaching of the Lord, 'You must be born again.' (John 3, 7) Though by nature we do incline to the love of self and the love of the world, those inclinations can be overcome. God can indeed create a clean heart and renew a right spirit within us. (Psalm 51, 10)

But to do so we must play our part. He cannot do something which is otherwise against our will. He cannot deliver us from our evils if we in fact have no desire or see no need to be delivered from them. He cannot purify our affections if they please and delight us. We must ourselves resolve to resist what is evil and, as we do so, what is evil is forced to relax its hold in our lives.

There are times, of course, when the task seems enormous and we wonder if it can ever be accomplished. We see so much of evil in ourselves, so many instances where our selfish regard for ourselves has entered into things. And yet if we will only make a start, taking just one thing and consciously shunning it, deliberately avoiding it, this is enough to initiate the process.

Too often we can be overwhelmed by it all and in the end do absolutely nothing about it. We half heartedly acknowledge our evils and feel bad about them for a time, but do not lay the groundwork for their removal from us. Self-compulsion must inevitably enter into it for we shall find that we must force ourselves to turn away from things which in the past have come easily to us and which, at the same time we found delightful. 'The state of regeneration begins with a man when he desists from evils as sins.' (*Divine Providence* 83) If we would be pure in heart this is where it must commence.

Concerning the pure in heart, it is said 'they shall see God' a promise which has been understood by many to mean some after death experience; a coming into the presence of God when we enter heaven if we have lived unselfish lives. But the promise means more than this. To see God is to understand. To see Him more clearly is to understand Him better. It is our mental sight, or what we otherwise refer to as our understanding, that is spoken of here.

It is certain that no one really sees or understands God if they are making no effort to shun their evils and to overcome their baser inclinations. One can talk about God and learn many things about Him, but understanding, comprehension, and the enlightenment of our thinking about Him is a different thing. This is what comes as we successfully resist our evils and the light of heaven dawns upon our minds. 'The interior thought of man' wrote Swedenborg 'which is the thought of his spirit, is either from hell or from heaven; it is from hell before evils are removed, but from heaven when they are removed. When it is from hell, then a man recognises only nature as God. But when man thinks from heaven, as is the case when evils are removed, then he sees from the light of heaven that there is a God, and that He is one.' (*Apocalypse Explained* 9542)

It is also with regard to Divine Truth, which all men, good or evil can know, but which in fact only the person who is striving to live by it comes to really understand. We can know many truths but we do not begin to understand them until we try to live by them. Then we come to see what they're all about and how they affect us. We see so much in them which we didn't see before. Lifeless statements of command become living truths in our minds. It all comes about as the result of the effort we make.

'Who shall ascend unto the hill of the Lord? or who shall stand in his holy place?', And the answer is given, '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. They will receive blessing from the Lord and vindication from God their Savior.' (Psalm 24:3-5)

The Swedenborg Programme – Number 138. <http://www.swedenborg.com.au>