

Suffered under Stormy Daniels: Purity of Heart in the Age of Donald Trump

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It seems almost quaint now, in this blustery season of Stormy Daniels disclosures, *Access Hollywood* tapes, and Michael Cohen revelations, to recall Jimmy Carter's 1976 confession to an interviewer from *Playboy* magazine, "I've looked on a lot of women with lust," Carter said. "I've committed adultery in my heart many times."

Time magazine later quipped, with wry sarcasm, that this interview "was possibly not the best call of President Carter's tenure."¹ The interview appeared only days before voters went to the polls that fall, in what was shaping up to be a tight race between Carter and then-President Gerald Ford. Many of the voters, biblically oblivious, were unaware that "adultery in my heart" is Bible-speak, not domestic policy, and therefore they simply blanked out the "in my heart" part. What they heard was the Democratic candidate for president of the United States, on the eve of the election, inexplicably committing political suicide by confessing that he was a serial adulterer. Carter's campaign went into freefall. He promptly dropped fifteen points in the polls before frantic aides could get out the counter-message that Carter was speaking only metaphorically, folks, only metaphorically.

But what Carter was really doing, of course, was riffing on the words of Jesus in Matthew, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. 5:27-28). Probably nearly every Baptist in Plains, Georgia, knew exactly what their neighbor, Jimmy Carter, meant by "adultery in his heart," even if his words left many others across the nation baffled and alarmed. He was merely articulating standard Christian anthropology, namely, "There is no one who is righteous, not one" (Rom. 3:10), and even when we human beings presume that we are being righteous, "all our so-called righteous deeds are, as Isaiah put it, 'filthy rags' (Is. 64:6, KJV). Even a ninety-year-old Sunday School teacher, who hasn't come within a hundred miles of making an idol, bearing false witness, murdering a neighbor, or coveting her neighbor's house or donkey, and who has never stolen a thing, not even a postage stamp or a paper clip, is still a sinner and, therefore, has broken all of the ten commandments *in her heart*.

The idea that otherwise quite respectable people are ready to admit in all honesty that, when it comes around to the heart, the beast still rages and creates a problem when it comes to the sixth commandment. We are thrown up hard against the words of Jesus: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (Matt. 5:8). And who is pure in heart? Well, evidently no one, not even one. Jimmy Carter was not only making a personal confession, but he was also making a universal declaration: we are all transgressors in our hearts. So how are we to understand this difficult beatitude, especially now that the lusts Jimmy Carter kept on a leash in his heart are no longer confined to the inner chambers of the heart but are running free in the highest levels of leadership in our land?

A good place to begin is with Matthew's own understanding of the human heart.

Heart (*kardia*) is a crucial term for Matthew, one he uses fifteen times in his Gospel. Jesus is “humble in heart” (11:29), and the preaching of the kingdom is sowing the Word “in the heart (13:19). The greatest commandment is “to love the Lord your God with all your heart...” (22:37). But people can lose their heartfelt love of God; thus, Jesus attacks the hypocrisy of his religious opponents by quoting Isaiah, “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me” (15:8). Jesus tells the disciples that the reason he speaks in parables is because “this people’s heart has grown dull” and they no longer “understand with their heart” (13:15), again alluding to Isaiah. If love for God springs from the heart, so too does evil. If a person speaks vilely or performs wicked deeds, these words and deeds spring “out of the heart” (15:18-19).

Mark Allan Powell is helpful when he flies over Matthew at 35,000 feet and summarizes how he understands Matthew to be using the word *heart*. “Here, and elsewhere in the Bible,” Powell says, “*kardia* seems simply to represent ‘the true self,’ what one really is, apart from pretense. Thus, to ‘understand with the heart’ (13:15) means to understand truly, to ‘forgive from the heart’ (18:35) means to forgive truly, and so on.”²

So far, so good, but if we leave the matter here, namely that “heart” in Matthew is roughly equivalent to what we mean today when we speak of “our true selves,” we are still in a quandary when we hear that sixth beatitude. “Blessed are those who are pure in their true selves, pure in who they truly are apart from pretense” is no less challenging than the original “blessed are the pure in heart,” because whether we are Baptists in Plains or existentialists in Paris or Copenhagen, we are all painfully aware that our “true selves” are sharply conflicted. The most saintly people we know may well have noble ideals, lofty goals, sterling character traits, admirable achievements, and merciful deeds emanating from their “true selves,” but also lurking in the dark recesses of those “true selves” are the little liars, thieves, idolaters, blasphemers, adulterers, and murderers, ready to spring at a moment’s notice to trash the commandments, if not in concrete action at least in secret desires. That is why Jimmy Carter’s truth-telling about the desires of his heart, to those who understood the religious framework out of which he spoke, came across not as a scandal but as candid and honest speech. This is why Paul’s words strike us all with the ring of truth: “I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.... I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand” (Rom. 8:19, 21).

So, if “purity of heart” means being unblemished in our “true selves,” then it is, frankly, an impossibility. But in the age of Trump, we want people who are pure in heart so dearly we cannot quite bring ourselves to let it go. We desperately cling to the notion that striving for “purity of heart,” that coming close to “purity of the true self,” is something politicians and others should desire and try to attain, and we do so as a defense against the impurity that assaults our sensibilities every day. Even when we admit that “purity of heart” is theoretically impossible for humans to reach, we still want it to rest in our imaginations as an encouraging and uplifting ideal. In our cultural moment, when the President is inflicting wounds on our social body that seem impossible to heal, when the political process vomits up a scandal a week, when priests by the hundreds, maybe the thousands, have made victims of innocent children, and when vicious tweets, bald-faced lies issued by the thousands, unbridled greed, moral corruption, cynical and narcissistic power ploys, and other

forms of raw sewage spew from the White House, the Supreme Court, the Congress, the Environmental Protection Agency, the church, and scores of sycophantic talk radio hosts, it is appealing to imagine that somewhere “over the rainbow bluebirds fly” and that there is a place we could go, a place where “purity of heart” is still honored, still preserved in amber as a possibility, a kind of spiritual Canada to which we can flee as refugees, if only in our dreams.

But Luther, who was obviously no stranger to cultural corruption, throws up a stop sign to any attempts to find “purity of heart” in flight from the moral decay all around us. He thought that any notion that we need to retreat from even the worst of societal breakdown, from the horrific moral wreckage that is our sad inheritance today, to escape to a cleaner place, a less messy world, a brighter plateau to find “purity of heart” was a mistake made by sophists and misguided monks. Such people, said Luther, “have no experience” and “have imagined that having a pure heart means for a [person] to run away from human society into a corner, a monastery, or a desert, neither thinking about the world nor concerning [themselves] with worldly affairs and business, but amusing [themselves] only with heavenly thoughts.”³

If “purity of heart” is not to be found somewhere over the rainbow, then where is it? “Then what is a pure heart? In what does it consist?” Luther went on to ask. Well, it’s not what we think it is. In fact, trying to contemplate purity on our own steam, ponder “purity of heart” out of the repertoire of our own spiritual instincts, is to look, argued Luther, in precisely the wrong direction. He imagines a monk in the monastery sitting in deep contemplation, and trying to purify himself, pushing away all concerns of the world, allowing only ideas he has about the nature of God to fill his mind. That monk, said Luther, with his customary scatological wit, “is actually sitting—if you will pardon the expression—in the dung, not up to his knees but up to his ears.” Why? Because this monk “is proceeding on his own ideas without the Word of God, and that is sheer deception and delusion, as scripture testifies everywhere.”⁴

Lest that sound merely pious, we should quickly point out that Luther is making a quite sophisticated counter argument to conventional ideas about “purity of heart.” Luther is arguing that to be “pure in heart” is not to possess some static virtue; it is instead a process of constantly contemplating that which we do *not* possess, but can desire, namely the Word of God. “What is meant,” said Luther, “by a ‘pure heart’ is this: one that is watching and pondering what God says and replacing its own ideas with the word of God. That alone is pure before God, yes purity itself, which purifies everything that it includes and touches.”⁵

So, to be “pure in heart” is not a moral achievement, but a direction toward which we are traveling, toward which we guide our “true selves.” To be “pure in heart” is not what we are; it is what is happening to us when we give ourselves to the Spirit of God who seeks to claim and reshape us. It is not sanctity, but sanctification. God is the only true purity, and it is not in our power to acquire purity, but only to receive it as a divine gift.

That is why “Blessed are the pure in heart” cannot stand alone but must be linked to “for they will see God.” “For they will see God” is set in the future, not the calendar future but the eschatological future. As New Testament scholar John Meier said,

Clearly, the beatitudes of Jesus are eschatological to the core. Human

happiness is no longer defined by a wisdom limited to a human future. The mourners, the meek, the merciful are declared happy *now*...because they are certain that they will find consolation, inheritance, and mercy on the last day, when God sets things right. The future triumph of God, not the present misery of humanity, determines what true happiness is, however covert its operation in this present age.⁶

It is in the ultimate consummation of all things that the pure in heart will see God. Seeing God is not so much a reward, as if Jesus were saying, "If you are pure in heart, then God will allow you to see God's face." Seeing God, rather, is the goal, the omega point, of a good and true life, a life that can be described as "pure in heart."

Imagine a man in his late twenties who has been raised by adoptive parents. He was loved and well-cared for by his adoptive family, but he also knows that his biological mother surrendered him for adoption not because she did not love him but because she was young, alone, impoverished, and desperate. She knew she could not care for him adequately in her circumstances, so she allowed him to be adopted by others in a heartbreaking act of sacrifice. His adoption, therefore, was an act of love in two ways. His new parents embraced him in their family as an act of love, and his biological mother, believing that he would be better off in a family of stability and means, also loved him by letting him go.

But now, as a young adult he desires to find his biological mother, to see her, to know who she is, to express his love for her even though he has been distant from her all these years, to let her know that in a deep way he belongs to her, and to wrap his arms around her in gratitude. So, he goes on a quest to locate her. Every hour of his day is occupied with thoughts of her, every ounce of energy spent in seeking her out, every moment he has in his mind the image of how he imagines her to be. He goes about his everyday life, going to work, attending to the tasks at hand, but his whole life leans forward toward that day when he will see his mother.

His focus on trying to be in the presence of his biological mother is an analogy to what Jesus means in the sixth beatitude. When everything about our true selves leans forward toward finding God, toward being in the presence and embrace of God, that is what is meant by purity of heart. It is not a location; it is a direction. It is not a place of moral achievement; it is desire toward which all that we are is focused.

In his *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing*, Søren Kierkegaard sees purity of heart in a woman making an altar cloth:

When a woman makes an altar cloth, so far as she is able, she makes every flower as lovely as the graceful flowers of the field, as far as she is able, every star as sparkling as the glistening stars of the night. She withholds nothing, but uses the most precious things she possesses. She sells off every other claim upon her life that she may purchase the most uninterrupted and favorable time of the day and night for her one and only, for her beloved work.⁷

When the altar cloth is finished and put to sacred use, says Kierkegaard, the woman would be distressed if someone looked at it and said, "What a wonderful and talented artist made this cloth." The purpose of the altar cloth was not to draw atten-

tion to her or her skill, but to the God for whom it was crafted. Her work on the cloth “was the highest happiness of all for the needlewoman to do everything in order to accomplish what was hers to do.”⁸ She was not desiring praise for her talents as an artist; she was desiring to use her life to fashion something that would be acceptable in the eyes of God. This is what it means to have “purity of heart.”

Back to Jimmy Carter’s confession that he committed adultery in his heart. What we hear now is not some tawdry locker room talk, but instead a humble man trying to weave the honest experiences of his life into an altar cloth. “Take my life, broken and unfinished” he was saying, to us and especially to God, “and let it be consecrated Lord to Thee. Take my real self, my honest, ethically introspective self, fashion it into an offering, and let me walk unashamed into your presence.”

Ted Gup of *The New Republic* contrasted Jimmy Carter’s admission of “adultery in my heart” to Donald Trump’s boastful comments on the Access Hollywood tape, including, “You know, I’m automatically attracted to beautiful—I just start kissing them. It’s like a magnet. Just kiss. I don’t even wait. And when you’re a star, they let you do it. You can do anything.”

The long-ago admission by Carter that he lusted in his heart can now be seen for what it was—not just that he felt the lure of temptation, but that he did not have to be ashamed of such impulses. It told us we were dealing with someone who was introspective, honest, and humble. In retrospect, the gaffe leant a meaningful insight into the candidate’s character, and in its strange way, was ennobling. His words were even brave....

Trump’s comments, on the other hand, contradict his very humanity. They were cravenly and intended only for the like-minded group of satyrs, namely *Access Hollywood* host Billy Bush and crew, gathered on the bus. The moment Trump stepped off the bus to greet actress Arianne Zucker, he put on his charming face, a study in deceit and hypocrisy. Unlike Carter’s words, Trump’s suggest a man incapable of looking inward, of feeling shame, humility, or love. That such a purposefully divisive figure could represent the best hopes of tens of millions of Americans, even as he revolts and alienates tens of millions of others, speaks to the yawning chasm that divides the nation politically and culturally. What comes to mind is the question that once brought down another demagogue, Joe McCarthy, more than 60 years ago: “Have you no sense of decency, sir?”⁹

So, “blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” Blessed are those who are focused on God’s Word and God’s promises, because they know, even amidst the strife and turmoil of a corrupt government, that God has not abandoned us. They know that even amidst the pollution and corruption of Donald Trump and all the tin pot dictators who preceded him, that the risen Christ is alive and working still for righteousness and justice. They go about the tasks placed into our hands these days, working toward a more just society against all odds. As they work, they feel themselves being shaped into persons of integrity, being made saints, if you will. They are leaning forward toward God’s Word, which is truth and can be trusted. Because they are confident that one day they will come face-to-face with the God who triumphs over all wrong, they can sing with confidence the old hymn:

Tho’ the cause of evil prosper,
Yet the truth alone is strong;

Tho' her portion be the scaffold,
And upon the throne be wrong;
Yet that scaffold sways the future,
And, behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow,
Keeping watch above His own.¹⁰

Notes

- 1 "Did He Just Say That? Jimmy Carter," in "Top 10 Unfortunate Political One-Liners," *Time* (online), http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1859513_1859526_1859518,00.html
- 2 Mark Allan Powell, "Matthew's Beatitudes: Reversals and Rewards of the Kingdom," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 58/3 (July, 1996), 472.
- 3 Jaroslav Pelikan, editor, *Luther's Works, Vol 21: The Sermon on the Mount and the Magnificat* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007), 34.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 John P. Meier, "Matthew 5:3-12," *Interpretation*, 44/3 (Jul 1990), 283.
- 7 Søren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing* (New York: Harper, 1964), 13.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ted Gup, "On the Subject of Lust, Donald Trump Is No Jimmy Carter," *The New Republic*, October 10, 2016, <https://newrepublic.com/article/137682/subject-lust-donald-trump-no-jimmy-carter>
- 10 James Russell Lowell, "Once to Every Man and Nation," public domain.