

BaptistWay Press® Adult Online Bible Commentary

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Studies in 14 Habits of Highly Effective Disciples

Lesson Nine

Purity

Focal Text

Psalm 24:1-6; Ephesians 5:1-16

Background

Psalm 24:1-6; Ephesians 5:1-16

Main Idea

Disciples pursue a life of purity.

Question to Explore

How can I pursue purity in an impure world?

Quick Read

God calls his followers to live pure lives in the midst of an impure world. Doing so results in authentic worship that reflects Christ to all.

Introduction

How do we avoid impurity in our world? A recent World Cup Soccer commercial portrays a group of men at a bus stop forming a line like a soccer team to block the water on the road from splashing a woman seated at the bus stop. It would be nice to have someone protecting us from the splash of impurity in our world. With the onslaught of images from media, television, movies, and the Internet, we need protection.

The psalmist once asked, “How can a young man keep his way pure?” (Psalm 119:9). That question has never been more relevant for believers than it is today. Jesus’ disciples commit themselves to purity as our Savior lived in purity. We find help in the words of

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King David and also in Paul's letter to the Ephesians. The call to purity is deeply rooted in the Bible. God's holiness leads his people to holiness.

Commentary

Pure to Enter the Presence of the King (Psalm 24)

As a young pastor I was once invited to eat lunch with the president of Baylor University. What does one wear to meet the president? I remember putting on my very best suit and tie. In countries which have kings and queens, there is a certain protocol for meeting the king. King David asks who may enter the presence of God the great king.

Remember that David was only the third king to reign over Israel. Saul reigned over all of Israel, and then his son Ishbosheth ruled over most of the tribes (2 Samuel 2:10), while David ruled over Judah and Benjamin from Hebron. King David knew from Samuel's story that God had always been Israel's king (1 Samuel 8:7). When Israel cried for an earthly king they did not reject Samuel but God.

Psalm 24 is a Royal Psalm about the heavenly King.¹ It ends with the high praise: "Who is he, this King of glory? The LORD almighty – he is the King of glory" (Psalm 24:8). It invites God's people to worship him as the sovereign king. As king of all the earth, God claims rightful possession of the earth, everything, and everyone.

Our worship begins with the truth that the world belongs to God. Why does God own it? David says, "Because God made it." Every molecule bears his fingerprints. God founded the earth upon the seas and established it upon the waters. "Earth," in this sense speaks of the land literally as it emerges separate from the waters. Genesis tells us that God did this (Genesis 1:9-10). Systematically and beautifully, he created land and later created the inhabitants of the land.

God, who created the earth, owns it. Not only does God own the earth, but also the inhabitants of the earth. One graffiti artist years ago wrote, "Man needs God like a fish needs a bicycle." David disagrees. Augustine prayed, "Oh God you have made us for yourself and we are restless until we find rest in you."²

Preparing to Worship in Purity (Psalm 24:1-4)

When we worship we give our King his worth, offering him his "worthship," or in shortened form, worship. In contrast with our yawning, begrudging entrance into houses of worship, David realized we needed to prepare. In a moment of clarity, he wondered in this psalm who could actually approach God in worship. Even the implied topography teaches us about God.

People went up to Jerusalem and then up even higher to ascend to Zion, the place of worship. Not only is God high, but he is holy. Moses discovered this when he came upon the burning bush. Upon his realization of the holiness or distinctiveness of God, he took

off his shoes. The Old Testament instructions about worship make clear that God is uncommon. How could one ever treat an uncommon God or his things as common?

How do we prepare ourselves to worship? The ancient Israelites went up to Jerusalem to worship. God's holy hill was Mount Zion where the temple would be built. There years before Abraham had offered to sacrifice Isaac. There David had purchased the threshing floor of Araunah (2 Samuel 24:24).

To this day three different religions see that spot as holy. Their adherents of Islam have built the Dome on the Rock, their second holiest site, behind Mecca. Devout practitioners of Judaism pray at the Wailing Wall, a remnant of the temple of old. Christians recognize that same place as the place where Jesus went up to worship and encountered the teachers of Judaism. When we entered the Dome on the Rock to observe the Islamic worship, we were instructed to take off our shoes.

David especially understood the implications of right preparation for worship. We learn of his desire to return the Ark of the Covenant to Israel after the Philistines sent it back (2 Samuel 5). David did not follow the guidelines for moving the Ark but instead built a cart for it. As the men transported it on the cart, one of the oxen which pulled the cart stumbled and the Ark almost fell to the ground. Thinking to catch the Ark, Uzzah reached out to catch it and lost his life (2 Samuel 6:6-7). Later David relocated the Ark as an act of worship, making sacrifices (2 Samuel 6:12-15). This time he prepared himself and the people, rightly discerning the holiness of God.

Like the Psalms of the Ascents (120-134), this psalm may have been sung as the people drew near to worship. Before they arrived they had to prepare themselves. So the psalmist asks a question about who is worthy to worship God. The psalmist identifies several characteristics of worthy worshipers. First worshipers must have clean hands symbolizing right actions. Ancient Judaism had several requirements for ritual cleansing. We too cleanse ourselves from all external sins. My earliest recollections of going to church involved getting as clean as possible. Growing up in Amarillo, Texas, my mother had learned that one must get clean and dressed properly to go to church.

Worshipers also prepare to honor God through a pure heart or right attitudes. In the Old Testament, the heart represents not so much the seat of emotion as volition. In the heart a person decides and wills. So the worshiper prepares through pure motives and decisions. Further, the true worshiper rejects idolatry and chooses to live the truth.

In the New Testament James deals with the issue of approaching a holy God with the same ideas. "Come near to God and he will come near to you" (James 4:8). God wants to have intimate fellowship with us. He has not moved away from us, but we have distanced ourselves from him. How can we draw near to our holy God? "Wash your hands you sinners and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your

laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up” (James 4:8-10).

For nearly forty years I have awakened each day to a psalm. I begin with Psalm 1 each new year and read one psalm a day through the year. As a young man I noticed the parallels between Psalm 24 and Psalm 15. There, too, David asks, “Lord who may dwell in your sanctuary? Who may live on your holy hill?” (Psalm 15:1). He offers a longer answer in Psalm 15. A worshiper should walk blamelessly, practice righteousness, speak the truth, refrain from slander, care for his neighbor, despise the vile, honor God-fearers, keep his oath, and remain financially pure by rejecting usury and bribes (Psalm 15:2-4). People who do these things live unshakable lives (Psalm 15:5b).

Promises to the Pure (Psalm 24:5-6)

God’s promise to the pure in Psalm 24 is equally powerful. When we worship God in purity, we receive the two-fold grace of blessing and vindication. First God blesses worshipers who come before him in purity. When I pronounce the benediction or blessing at the end of our worship services, I often remember Aaron’s words of blessing on the worshipers in ancient Israel, “The LORD bless you and keep you. The LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace” (Numbers 6:24-26).

Second, God offers vindication to his people. In this context, David is not promising that God will say our wrong actions and attitudes are right. God does not wink at our sin. This passage points to the later teaching of Paul about justification in the New Testament. How can a holy God make unholy people pure? Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Finally, God allows us the joy of worshiping him. When we prepare ourselves for worship God invites us to seek his face. The image is beautiful, like a child who has made a grievous mistake and then lifts his eyes to a forgiving parent. When we have been made right with God, we do not run *from him* like Adam and Eve. Instead we run *to him*, seeking his face, only to find that God has been looking for us, waiting like the father of the prodigal son, for us to come to ourselves and come home to him (Luke 15).

This God we worship in purity is the God who met Jacob at Bethel (Genesis 28:13-15) as he left Israel and grappled with him by the river Jabbok as he returned (Genesis 32:22-31). In our early years at Tallowood, our young people sang these words in worship, “Oh God let us be the generation that seeks, that seeks your face O God of Jacob.” Don’t you want to be part of that generation? I confess, I do.

Purified to Become Children of Love and Light (Ephesians 5:1-16)

We may be tempted to think that the world has never been as immoral as it is today. My New Testament professor, Virtus Gideon, told of the erotic artwork on the walls of

ancient Pompeii. Excavators reportedly had to cover the pictures to continue their work. A dozen years or so ago, we took a tour of the Seven Churches of Revelation in modern day Turkey. The ancient city of Ephesus, called the Lumen Asia or “light of Asia” in the time of Christ, desperately needed spiritual light. A footprint on the main street of the excavated city pointed the way to a brothel.

As we left the tour, an artist sold replicas of ancient idols outside the city gate. The statues and pictures were X-rated. Though we did not buy anything, the experience reminds us just how perverted the people of ancient Ephesus were. In the first century A.D., the Apostle Paul established a church in that immoral city, calling them to live pure lives in an impure world.

After the strong theological and doctrinal reminders of chapters 1-3, Paul moved into the practical life of Christians by encouraging the early Ephesian believers to put off the old person of sin and to put on the new person of Christ. Then in chapters 5 and 6 Paul has much to say in Ephesians about the responsibility of husbands and wives, children and parents. But before all of that he set forth a powerful principle. The highest responsibility of every person is to become a disciple of Jesus Christ. If we get that right and become imitators of God, then God will empower us to live well in all of our other relationships.

This is the one relationship which holds the most promise for everything we do. In some ways the kinds of parents we will be has to do with the kind of children we are to God. Unfortunately our own discipleship does not guarantee our kids’ love for God. We can love God and love our kids, but we cannot make them love God. But if we live as disciples, they will know the way home to God – and we pray they will find their way home to him.

Before we can be leaders of others we must lean into what it means to be children of God, loved by him, living in his light! Today whether we are moms or dads, married or single, young or old – we are all children of someone – and we can be children of God, children of love and light.

As Children of Love, Disciples Imitate God in Love (Ephesians 5:1-2)

Paul extends a simple and powerful word of comfort to all followers of Jesus: You are loved. This love empowers us to be kind and compassionate and forgiving. “Be imitators of God, therefore as dearly loved children” (Eph. 5:1). In fact the word for “beloved” here is the same one the Father used when he acknowledged his Son at his baptism: “...This is my Son, whom I love...” (Matthew 3:17).

Daily, it is good to remind ourselves that God loves us. He loves us when we are having a great day. God loves us when we are having a bad day. God models unconditional love for us so that we may love each other unconditionally. A good friend of mine said he emerged from the darkest season in his life when he came to believe that God loved him “no matter what.” Do we believe that? In another letter Paul writes, “But God

demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). In other words, God loved us when we were at our worst.

Ted Kaczinski, the infamous “Unabomber” who mailed bombs and hurt people, would not acknowledge his mom in the courtroom. She wrote him letters once a month when he was in prison: “I want you to know, Ted, that when children are born, the parents give them the gift of unconditional love for a lifetime. This is true of you. No matter what happens, my love for you will be there for a lifetime. Love, Mother.”³ God loves us like that! Sometimes people ask me, “What would you do if your kids did this or that bad behavior?” My answer is, “I would love them. I would disagree with their sin, but I would love them.”

We live lives of love because God has lavished his love on us. John writes, “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!” (1 John 3:1). As God sacrificed for us, we love others sacrificially. We especially see this in our earthly parents.

Even bringing a child into the world calls for sacrifice, doesn’t it? My young niece Amanda Diehl had several miscarriages and then lost a baby almost full-term. She and her husband J.J. were devastated. Then almost immediately a baby was born and offered to them for adoption. So they have Landon Diehl. Then last year they found out they were expecting.

In January they put Amanda on bed rest. For three months she was confined in a hospital bed trying to keep the baby alive to full-term. In May of this year, the baby was born: 3 lbs 13 oz; 16 inches long – they named her Landri – that side of our family are all Cowboys fans.

J.J. and Amanda’s love in adoption and in great physical sacrifice in pregnancy show me a picture of the heavenly Father’s love for us. Remember the old Rex Humbard theme song? “I am loved, I am loved, I can risk loving you. For the one who knows me best loves me most!”⁴

Philip Yancey says, “Love deems this world worth rescuing!”⁵ God sees our world sinking and he sent his Son to save it. Remember John 3:17, “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” So this week I met with a man who wrote a caustic letter to me after we invited him to church with a mailer. It was a beautiful meeting. He does not agree with me but I love him. I am going to meet him and his wife for lunch soon. Jesus died for his enemies. Can we love those who disagree with us and dialogue with them? I pray that we can.

As Children of Light: Disciples Imitate God in Holiness (Ephesians 5:3-15)

Paul wrote to believers: “But among you” (Eph. 5:3a). Paul never told the non-Christian world to clean up its act. Paul was not looking for a more moral society – he was looking

for God's kingdom and salvation to cover the earth. This will include morality, but morality is not possible apart from salvation. If we expect non-Christians to live like Christians we are going beyond the Scriptures.

We must be more concerned when Christians live in ways that belie our salvation and our faith. "But among you (believers) there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people" (Eph. 5:3). In our impure world this is increasingly hard to do.

I made the mistake again recently of wearing my white shirt while I was cooking spaghetti. My goal with spaghetti is to get it *in me* without getting it *on me*, but it is so hard to do. Even wearing my apron, I splashed a few drops of sauce on the shirt. I hope the dry cleaner can remove them.

Paul gets even more specific: Purity has to do with language as well. No obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking but rather thanksgiving. My mother enforced this when I was a child by washing my mouth out with Ivory soap. She made her point one time and I was no worse for the lesson.

Why don't Christians speak the way non-Christians do? Our conversation and our conduct speak to our character. Emerson wrote, "Sow a thought, and you reap an action, sow an act and you reap a habit, sow a habit reap a character, sow a character, reap a destiny."⁶

Further, Paul tells believers, "Do not be partners with them" (Eph. 5:7). The word for "partners" is *metochoi* – don't share in that style of life. Why not? Because that is no longer who we are. Ivory soap will not resolve our struggle with sin. It took blood to do that!

We must marvel at what God has done to us. Paul says, "For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light" (Eph. 5:8). Darkness was our identity. *It is not just that we lived in a dark world but the darkness was who we were.* We all have a shady past! But now we are light in the Lord. When we become believers, his light eclipses our darkness.

What does God's marvelous light produce in Christ's disciples? "...all goodness, righteousness and truth" (Eph. 5:9). So we dissociate ourselves from deeds of darkness and even expose them. How were we transformed from darkness to light? By our own works? No. But by the grace of God we have been changed over and we are still being transformed.

We are facing critical issues in our culture. The broader societal opinion on many moral issues is shifting rapidly. Followers of Jesus, who know God's gracious forgiveness, shouldn't want to discriminate against people who are tempted to sin. Neither should we condone discrimination.

Still God's standard of purity is not finally subject to popular opinion.

We want to be loving and kind to all persons in our world. God loves sinners. This is good news because we are all sinners. So I'm seeking the welfare of the city we live in, praying for our leaders, and I'm praying for every person in our city to come to know Jesus. How do we show the love of Christ so that people want what we have?

We have marvelous freedom to participate in the political process. We have thoughts and we share them. Further, we pray for our leaders in government. I saw a bumper sticker recently that said, "Pray for our elected officials. . . Psalm 109:8". I looked it up and it said, "Let another take his place of leadership . . ." Well that is one way to pray.

Conclusion

We who live in the light just by loving Jesus will make the darkness uncomfortable. And if you are light, then darkness can't ultimately threaten you. There is not enough darkness in the universe to extinguish a single candle burning brightly. So shine! I am convinced that our only hope is to live as children of the light.

What is our goal for non-Christians: do we want them to leave us alone and do us no harm? Well of course. But don't we want more for them? We want all people to see the light of Jesus. How will that happen? The same gospel that saves us can save all sinners. And none are beyond God's reach.

Eugene Peterson says, "Muckraking is not gospel work. Witch-hunting is not gospel work. Shaming the outcast is not gospel work. Forgiving sin is gospel work."⁷ Tim Keller says, "Here's the gospel: we're more sinful than we ever dared believe; we're more loved than we ever dared hope."⁸ Our only hope is the resurrection. We were dead in our transgressions and sins. But God made us alive in Christ. Christians live in love, light, and wisdom - redeeming the time.

Let's live what we believe, becoming pure through Christ and purifying the world we live in through our words and deeds.

Jesus said, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (Matthew 5:8).

Meet the Writer: Dr. Duane Brooks

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Duane was called to preach while in middle school in Germany and ordained in Great Falls, Montana. He has served as pastor in four Texas Baptist churches - New Hope Baptist Church in Cedar Park, Williams Creek Baptist Church in Mart, and Pleasant Grove Baptist Church in Rosebud. Duane and his wife, Melanie, have two sons, Graham and Chase, and a daughter, Casey.

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¹ C. Hassell Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2001), 121. Bullock provides a literary and theological introduction to the book of Psalms identifying type or forms of Psalms as Psalms of Praise, Lament, Thanksgiving, Trust, Psalms of the Earthly King, Psalms of the Heavenly King, and

Psalms of Wisdom, Psalms of Torah and Imprecatory Psalms. This is a Psalm of the heavenly King or Royal Psalm.

² Augustine. *Confessions*. Trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1998), 5.

³ Robert K. Elder, "A Brother Lost, a Brotherhood Found," *Chicago Tribune*, May 18, 2008.

⁴ Gaither Vocal Band. "I am Loved," *Reunite*, Spring Hill Music Group, 2009.

⁵ Philip Yancey, *Rumors of Another World: What on Earth are We Missing?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 172.

⁶ <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/416934-sow-a-thought-and-you-reap-an-action-sow-an>. Accessed 7/14/2014.

⁷ Eugene Peterson, *Tell It Slant* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 186.

⁸ Tim Keller, *Paul's Letter to the Galatians: Living in Line with the Truth of the Gospel*. Pdf available at: http://0956e2ce3351854ef359-8a77f8ff86344bb433e108c949b0b379.r85.cf2.rackcdn.com/uploaded/g/0e2048049_galatians-study-leaders-guide.pdf.