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Keeping a Clean Heart (Chapter 7 of For Today: A Prayer When Life Gets Messy)

Patrick Allen

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Keeping a Clean Heart

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

—MATTHEW 5:8

Introduction

When I heard that some of the kids at school received an allowance, money their parents actually gave to them for no particular reason other than to do a few chores around the house, I could hardly believe it. It seemed too good to be true. I never received an allowance, and the idea of having some spending money of any kind was usually out of the question. Once in a while, my mother would give my brothers and me a quarter each to go to the municipal swimming pool if we hoed five rows of corn in the garden, but that was the extent of it. Honestly, we had a loving and supportive family life and there was always good food on the table and clean clothes in the closet, but there wasn't any extra money for extravagances like allowances. We lived paycheck to paycheck, and my parents fretted far more than I knew about running out of money before the end of the month. So, I decided to earn my own spending money. At the age of thirteen, I became an independent businessman—peddling papers for the *Saginaw News*.

As it turned out, it was a good opportunity to learn about the world of business. I stopped by the newsstand each afternoon and picked up the papers for delivery. Once a week, I would go around to my customers

and collect what was owed, and then go back to the newsstand to pay my own bill. Anything left over after the bill was paid belonged to me, my pay. Of course, if you couldn't collect from a customer or two, it cut into your earnings. As I think back, it seems the young paperboys took all the risks. The newsstand got paid in full each week regardless of how much I was able to collect. So, I faithfully paid my bill of \$34.25 to Mrs. Patterson each week, the proprietor of the newsstand, and while I could make as much as \$10 each week (that was the big recruiting slogan), I rarely made more than \$6, and usually less, because not everyone would pay up. I learned quickly that my success depended on my own ability to find my customers at home with some cash on hand. It wasn't as simple as my boss made it out to be. Still, it was honest work, and it taught me discipline, responsibility, initiative, and patience.

One week, I stopped by the newsstand to pay my bill. I had my cash separated into little pockets in my money pouch: \$34.25 for Mrs. Patterson and the rest for me. I stood in line along with several other paperboys, but when I got to the front of the line, she looked at her ledger, smiled at me, and said, "Well, I see that you have already paid your bill for this week. See you next week." I knew that I hadn't paid my bill yet, but instead of protesting, I simply headed back home with some extra cash in my pouch. It was my lucky day, I thought. I hid the money in a drawer in my bedroom, and while I must have spent the money little by little on something, I honestly have no recollection of how the money was spent. I never told anyone what happened, but it would come to mind from time to time. I kept telling myself that it was just a small thing—her mistake, not mine.

Fifteen years later, I received a promotion and joined the management team at the bank where I worked. One of my new responsibilities was to manage the cash in the bank vault. During my orientation, the president of the bank looked me square in the eyes and told me that he thought I would be a good bank officer as long as I remembered that the money in the vault didn't belong to me. In his own words, "You'll do fine as long as you remember that it's not your money." As I drove home that evening, Mrs. Patterson came to mind once again. I took advantage of her mistake, and I made her money my own. I had to make it right.

The next time I went home to visit my parents, I stopped by Mrs. Patterson's house. She looked surprised when she answered the door, and said, "You're an Allen, aren't you? Patrick, I think?" "Yup," I replied as my words just tumbled out, "and Mrs. Patterson, I have a confession to make.

I owe you some money. You see, fifteen years ago, you thought I paid my paper route bill one week but I didn't—\$34.25, so here's a \$50 bill. I'm so sorry. Please forgive me."

"Well," Mrs. Patterson responded, "I appreciate the gesture, but I can't take your money because you don't own me anything—actually you owe your mother. You see, I stopped by your house after my cash deposit was short exactly the amount of your weekly bill. Your mother went into your room and came back saying that you had the money in your dresser drawer. She wrote me a check for the full amount and that was that. We never talked about the incident again."

Wow! I was stunned, embarrassed, and humbled. This restitution thing was going to be harder than I had imagined. I sheepishly went back home and waited for a chance to talk to mom alone. Later that evening as we were doing the dishes, I told mom that I stopped by Mrs. Patterson's house to settle an old account, but she said that the bill was already paid. Mom kept on washing the dishes and said, "Yes, I found the money and paid the bill with a check. I left the money where I found it, believing that you would do the right thing some day—and you have. I knew you would." As I blinked the tears from my eyes, I pulled out the \$50 bill and laid it on the counter. "Oh," she said, "that's too much." "No," I insisted, "it's been fifteen years, so this only makes up for inflation." She took the money, put it in her apron pocket, and gave me a hug.

At church that Sunday, there was a special offering for the youth group. They needed support for a summer missions trip, a venture that would impact their Christian walk and mold their character. I saw my mother slip the \$50 bill into the offering plate and pass it down the row. I quickly pulled out my wallet and put another \$50 bill in the plate. Mother looked at me with that motherly look and shook her head as if to say, "No, that's not necessary." I grinned and whispered, "Consider it an interest payment on an old loan." She nodded and whispered, "Paid in full."

From time to time, I would see Mrs. Patterson when I came home for a visit, and when I did I gave her a smile and a hug. She would always say, "It's so good to see you back home." And, indeed, it was. Wiping the slate clean may come at a cost, but living with a clean heart is priceless.

* * *

In this chapter, we will examine what it means to keep a clean heart, to be pure in heart as the Sermon on the Mount puts it (Matt 5-7). There are

some predictable patterns that get us in trouble, and thankfully there are some simple but courageous things we can do to move beyond the cycle of failure, guilt, and shame that burdens us and slows us down. To pray for God's help in keeping a clean heart is certainly a bold and confident expression of faith in a God who wants us to live abundantly. Of course, some of this work is humbling but the promise is that the pure in heart shall see God—at work in our own lives, in the lives of others, and in our churches and neighborhoods, too. This is my prayer for all of us, that we shall see God. Let's begin.

Help Me to Keep My Heart Clean

When we pray, asking God to help us keep our hearts clean, what exactly do we want God to do for us and in us? What is a clean heart in the first place, and how do we keep it so, if that is at all possible? I confess that I've come to believe that it is more than possible. In fact, it is God's intention for us—to be holy, but it takes a real commitment of time and intention—and God's loving care and help, too. We'll begin by looking at the word—*heart*—and as we shall see, it is as central and vital to our spiritual well-being as the organ that pumps life-giving blood is to our physical well-being. Then, we'll turn our attention to the meaning of a “clean heart” and some spiritual practices to keep away from a daily cycle of failure and frustration that keeps many of us far too often and far too long in the ditches of life.

Having Heart

The Greek word for heart, *kardia*, refers to both the physical heart and the spiritual center of life. I've come to understand that the two are connected more than we even know. In fact, all of life is connected in deeply spiritual ways. Certainly, when the physical heart is functioning properly, it aids in clarity of thought and actions, words and deeds; and when it isn't, much of our passion and good intentions can be quickly derailed. In Scripture, we find some form of the word *kardia* used over eight hundred times, referring to certain aspects of the spiritual center of life.

Clearly, even when referring to our own inner life, heart can be used in so many different ways that its meaning is difficult to pin down. For example, we can speak of having a broken heart, a hard heart, a wicked

heart, or even having no heart at all. We can plead with someone to have a heart, meaning to extend some kindness or compassion, to give someone a break. We can say that we carry someone in our heart, as a tender or precious memory. We can refer to someone as “my heart,” indicating a deep and profound love or connection. We can describe someone as having a good heart, meaning their intentions, actions, and character are pure, above reproach. We can encourage others to take heart. And we can say that someone has the heart of a champion or a heart for ministry, or that their heart just isn’t in the task at hand, whatever that task might be.

So, having heart can refer to either internal conditions or external behaviors—or both, our intentions and motives, our desires and passions, our thoughts, our actions, our commitments, even our character, and they can be holy or wholly destructive. When we pray, asking God for help in keeping our hearts clean, we are asking for divine assistance to keep a healthy and grace-filled alignment between our internal conditions and our external behaviors, to act in consistently good and healthy ways. In essence, we are asking for help to become persons of integrity, holy persons. In my view, it is one thing to become a Christian, but another thing altogether to embody a deep sense of the holy in our lives, to be like Christ. Deep down, I believe we all want to be holy, to respond to that sacred calling for our lives, for we know that the pure in heart shall see God. And we do want to see God, not only at the end of our journey, but while we journey, too. If Immanuel, God is with us, means anything, it means hope, healing, and grace as we journey, even if we don’t know where we are going, and that is most of us.

So, where do we start if we want to keep a clean heart? Let’s take a look in the closet where all the things that you don’t talk about are stored.

Having a Clean Heart

The Greek word *katharos* means to be pure or clean, unstained, blameless, not guilty. And it can be taken literally, ceremonially, or spiritually. That is to say, a person can take a bath and be literally clean; undergo a waiting period accompanied by sacrificial offerings, washings, or other sacred rituals and be pronounced ceremonially clean by some religious authority; or stand before God with a pure heart and be spiritually clean. It is in this latter sense that we are intending when we pray to God, “Help me to keep my heart clean.”

Such a prayer, if it is to be taken seriously by God and by each of us, demands our honesty and humility. The Apostle Paul confesses, “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do” (Rom 7:15). This is a poignant confession that we don’t always do what we know to do, but sadly do just the opposite. We have all done that from time to time. And Proverbs asks rhetorically, “Who can say, ‘I have kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin?’” (Prov 20:9). The answer is clear—no one the writer knows, at least not of their own doing. And John adds this pronouncement to any of us who think we are perfect, “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8). What is clear is that if we are bold enough to ask God to help us keep a clean heart while fully acknowledging our own frailties and limitations, it is, indeed, a bold prayer.

Thankfully, John does not conclude at this point, at a point of desperation and deeper-than-doom despair. He continues with a wonderful promise, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). Now that’s good news! There is a place, a graceful place, for humility and honesty, and God responds to us where we are, not where we would like to be. In the story of the prodigal son’s homecoming, the father didn’t demand that the son take a bath before he wrapped his arms around him and gave him a great hug. God will meet us on the journey home, too.

So, where does all of this leave us? Clearly, we cannot simply determine that we will produce a clean heart totally of our own accord. That’s silly. We need grace and forgiveness and divine help, but a clean heart is something we can strive for, ask for, despite of and in full view of our human frailties and failings. David was full of remorse when he wrote, “Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit in me” (Ps 51:10). This was just after he had been confronted about his actions that intentionally took an innocent man’s life. We’ll discuss this story in more detail in the Scripture portion of this chapter, so suffice it here to say that despite his failings, he asked God to renew his spirit and create in him a clean heart. There were consequences for his actions, of course, but as far as I know, God faithfully answered David’s heartfelt plea. And we find this promise in Ezekiel, “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh” (Ezek 36:26). I think we should all claim this promise as our own, trusting God to remove our hearts of stone and give each of us a heart of flesh, alive, full of humility and gratitude and grace.

If we truly want a clean heart, we will have to deal with something that we don't like to even talk about—sin, our actions that put us in the downward cycle, starting with poor decisions and ending up with secrets stowed away in our spiritual closets. There, they simply take up space and sap our spiritual energy. Just like the Apostle Paul, we do what we do not want to do, that which we know we should not do. And when we do, there is usually deception involved. We involve ourselves in actions that we wouldn't want anyone to see. We say we were doing one thing when in fact we did something altogether different—in secret. We say that we were in one place when in fact we were somewhere else. We say that we were with someone when in fact we were with someone else. We say that we were given that money or those supplies when in fact we took them. We say that we were only trying to keep the boss informed when in fact we were undercutting and hurting another team member. I could go on and on, of course, but I think you get the point. We make poor decisions, intentional choices, and then cover them up with deceit and outright lies. The result is another secret that we don't want to talk about taking up residence in our spiritual closet. Sometimes, as in the case of my theft of Mrs. Patterson's newspaper money, a secret can stay in the closet for decades—even longer, but they don't go away. They stand as witnesses to our failures, poor choices, and downright sins, and they beg our attention. Surely, if we want a clean heart, we have to clean out the closet. And if we are bone honest, most of us have something we need to take to the dump.

In ancient times, purity was thought to be achieved by one of two processes—fire or pruning. For most of us, it is a fire (a crisis) that forces us to publicly and honestly face the secrets in our closets. After some time, the truth comes out about a lie we've been nursing or a secret we've been hiding. Sometimes we're caught in the act of cutting moral corners, and in the heat and pain of the fire we must face the music. Such a fire is humiliating and humbling, and the burns hurt. The pain is real, of course, and sadly it spreads to those around us, too. It can result in lost jobs, squandered opportunities, and damaged or severed relationships. Sometimes, something very good is permanently lost, and the pain of a broken relationship can continue to disrupt lives for generations. Our decisions do have a moral trajectory; sin takes us somewhere, and not to healthy places where we want to live or be found. There is no way or no need to sugarcoat this reality. We are accountable for our actions.

However, if faced with courage, the fire can bring healing, too. Things won't necessarily just go away or return to normal, but over time there can be a new normal. Despite the pain and suffering, and in some cases because of it, a new normal can be established—one with a clean heart. Memories and regrets will persist and revisit us from time to time, but the pain will gradually subside as we embrace the forgiveness and healing that God and others extend to us, and that we extend to ourselves, too. This is perhaps the most difficult thing to do.

Pruning seems to be a much better option than fire to me. Instead of hiding secrets in our closet and locking the door with the hope that no one will see what is inside, why not open the door and clean it out? Why not face up and squarely deal with those things we don't want to talk about or let anyone see? Of course, it can be painful, it probably will, but waiting for a fire to break out is not a helpful or hopeful option either. The time to deal with the items hidden in our spiritual closets is now, today. We prune roses in the winter with spring in mind. Pruning brings new growth. If we want to have a clean heart, we must first cut away the dead branches. The pruning process begins with recognition, then repentance (reorientation, turning in a new direction), and, if necessary, restitution. The result will be freeing—a restoration, a clean closet and a clean heart.

Keeping a Clean Heart

Having a clean heart is one thing; keeping a clean heart is quite another thing altogether. I get that. At times, one wonders if it is even possible to do so, and some Christian traditions have decided that it isn't. Instead, it is simply an endless cycle of sin and repentance, enacted weekly or even daily. It seems to me that God intends more for us and from us than just an endless repetitive cycle of failure and recovery; he calls us to be holy. The word "holy" is found in Scripture over 1200 times so it isn't just a throwaway or throw-in word, and the Apostle Peter is quite direct about God's intent, "But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy'" (1 Pet 1:15-16). Here, Peter is most likely referring to verses in Leviticus where the call to be holy is repeated on at least six different occasions.

Of course, this can be intimidating and discouraging. So, when we pray, asking God to help us keep our hearts clean, where do we start? I think the starting point is to be clear that purity of heart deals with

intention, not perfection. We will never be perfect in all we do, but our intentions and motives can be pure. When we ask for God's help, we must rely on God's provision. God does not ask us to do the impossible, but rather challenges us to do more than we think we are able to do. We start with the recognition that it is a divine partnership, not a solo task.

But we do play a critical role—it is not all up to God either. We are admonished in Proverbs to guard our heart because everything flows from it (4:23), everything; and during the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus cautioned all of us to be mindful of where we store up our treasures because that is where our hearts will be, too (Matt 6:21). We need to pay attention daily, to be intentional about the call to be holy. To stop, look, and listen for that still small voice that will push and guide us to be a certain kind of person, mindful of what is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy (Phil 4:8–9). If we are to keep our hearts clean, our hearts and minds must be in sync, to have integrity or wholeness. It is a daily discipline, a journey, not just a happy face we put on for Sunday worship. It requires that we be honest about our failures and weaknesses, and to make amends when necessary, but to be tender and kind with others and ourselves, too. When we pray for God's help to keep our hearts clean, it is not a prayer prayed in vain. It is a prayer of intention, of conviction, and with eternal possibilities.

Seeing God

Before we look at several stories from Scripture that speak to all of us about keeping our hearts clean, I want to take a moment to point out what I have come to believe is one of the most encouraging promises Jesus made to us. Early in his public ministry, he went up on a mountainside, sat down, and began to teach anyone who would listen. This discourse, found in Matthew 5–7, is known as the Sermon on the Mount, the most powerful sermon I know. Jesus began with a set of promises (the Beatitudes) including the one serving as an epigraph for this chapter: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (Matt 5:8). What a promise! The pure in heart shall see God. When we pray, asking God to help us keep our hearts clean, we are asking to see God, too, and the promise is that we will.

But what does it mean to see God? Will we see him in a burning bush or a wind storm or a volcanic eruption? That would be remarkable,

but probably not. God does not need to impress anyone, including us. Instead of looking for God in all his kingly majesty and power and authority, I have come to believe that we see him best when we are still, quiet, and intent on first hearing his voice, even if from a distance. Waiting, watching, and listening are practices that bring us closer to God, and more able to recognize his voice and respond to his promptings.

If we wait and watch carefully and prayerfully, see God we will, in the faces of those we encounter each day, in our neighborhoods, in our work, in our churches, and in the good and not-so-good days that come our way, glimpsing God being God, active and gracious, bringing hope and healing to a desperate world. We will see God at work when the truth is told, when grief is expressed, and when hope is professed in a world where pretense, denial, and despair are the order of the day. As we pray to keep our own hearts clean, God is at work in us and through us. When we are intentional about this spiritual journey, God will meet us on the road, wherever that road takes us. And when we get there, wherever there is, the good news is that God is already there and at work.

Ultimately, we need not be satisfied with seeing God at a distance, catching a glimpse of his work here and there while peaking around a rock or hiding our faces in our hands as he passes by. No, we are called to be holy, and we want to be close to God, seeing him face to face as a friend sees a friend. The good news is that this is indeed possible but it takes intention, humility, resolve, and, above all, time. In my view, the call to holiness, to be a holy person, is a lifetime journey. It doesn't just happen, and for most of us, including me, it doesn't happen overnight, but happen it can and will. The promise is that the pure in heart will see God, and I am convinced that Jesus didn't have in mind some type of drive-by with a wave-and-a-smile encounter. No, if the incarnation means anything to us, it means that God became flesh and lived among us with grace and truth (John 1:14), wanting to see each of us face to face. The quest begins for each of us with the desire for a clean heart, and a daily request for God's help to keep it that way.

Scripture

Before we turn our attention to some words of practical advice and some questions for reflection and discussion, I want us to look at three short stories from Scripture that examine and illuminate different lessons to be

learned about keeping a clean heart—and in doing so, seeing God. We will look first at the story of King David and Nathan, then the story of a woman caught in adultery, and finally a quick look at some of Job's trials and tribulations. As you will see, each story has something important to teach us.

David and Nathan

Nathan was a prophet in David's court. Generally speaking, he was there to provide both support and accountability for the king, bringing messages from God. At times, he brought messages of encouragement and guidance, and at other times he spoke words of caution and rebuke. As you might imagine, these latter words, even though they were from God, were brought with a certain amount of trepidation since it was never clear how the king would react. The prophet had a message from God, but the king had all the power.

In 2 Samuel 11–12, we find the story of David and Bathsheba, not one of the king's prouder moments. King David saw Bathsheba bathing on an adjacent rooftop and decided he must have her, despite the fact that she was married to someone else. Not long thereafter, the report came to him that she was pregnant. At first, David tried to trick her husband into thinking that the baby was his, but when that didn't work he gave orders to have the husband stationed at the very heart of the battle, thus insuring his demise. Then, Bathsheba moved into the palace.

Of course, this did not sit well with God, so Nathan the prophet came to David and told him a story about a rich man who had a large flock of sheep but took a poor man's only lamb to feed a visitor, a lamb that was like a member of his family. David was livid and swore that the man should make restitution before he was put to death. Nathan looked him straight in the eyes and told the king that the story was actually about him, the man who took another man's wife. What a powerful confrontation!

At this point, David has several options open to him. After all, he was the king. He could have killed the messenger, but he didn't. He could have dismissed Nathan and ignored the message, treating Nathan as someone who was not to be trusted as reliable, but he didn't do that either. Instead, the powerful king simply bowed his head and contritely said, "I have sinned against the Lord" (2 Sam 12:13). Nathan told David

that God would forgive his transgression, but there would be a price to be paid. His son would not live—and he didn't. Surely, David remembered this tragedy the rest of his life, even to his grave.

An interesting side note to this story occurs years later. When David was close to death, he needed someone he could trust with his kingdom to take and anoint Solomon as the next king. Guess who David chose? You're right—Nathan. Truth tellers are not always popular, but they are trustworthy.

I don't think I need to connect all the dots here, so suffice it to say that when we are confronted with our own unclean behavior, we have a choice to make, too. We can kill the messenger by attacking the character of the person or the credibility of the message. We can simply deny and dismiss the message as irrelevant and misguided, or we can contritely admit our actions and accept the consequences they bring, being purified by fire. Very likely, there will be some difficult days, but a clean heart can be restored.

A Woman Caught in Adultery

The story of the woman caught in adultery is found in John 8:1–11. The earliest manuscripts and many other ancient witnesses do not mention this story, but I have included it here anyway, not to argue whether or not it should be taken literally (I honestly do not know if it actually happened), but because the story makes a point that I want us to take seriously. Certainly, this story has been taken seriously since at least the fourth century. That's good enough for me.

You may recall the story. A woman caught in adultery is brought to Jesus by some teachers of the law and the Pharisees. It is a crowded scene. They report that the Law of Moses commands them to stone her, and asks Jesus what they should do. Of course, it was a trick question, designed to trap Jesus. He bends down and writes something in the dirt, and tells them to go ahead but the one without sin should throw the first stone. One by one they leave the scene, the older ones first. With no one left to condemn her, Jesus sends her on her way, admonishing her to leave her life of sin.

What a remarkable story. There are many points that could be made, but I want to point out only one. Jesus didn't congratulate the men for zealously keeping the law, serving as public watchdogs by bringing the

woman before the crowd to face accusations, humiliation, even death. Instead, he confronted the accusers about their own unclean hearts. It is not surprising to me that the older men, faced with Jesus' searching words, left the scene first. Hopefully, age brings some humility and insight. When we ask God to help us keep a clean heart, it is a deeply personal matter, and it takes our full attention. We are not called to be the sin police for the entire community. God will be the judge; we're called to be the lovers.

Job

I have always been fascinated by the story of Job, found in the Old Testament book by the same name. If you are unfamiliar with this story, I do commend it to you. There is much there to chew on. For now, however, I want to focus our attention on just one facet of the story. According to the story, Job was a good man, blameless and upright—a man without guile or sin. He kept a clean heart, but he was beset with a number of terrible tragedies and disasters. He lost everything: his house, his cattle, his friends, his reputation, even his family. There's no other way to describe it other than to say that it was awful, simply awful.

So, why? Why did a good person like Job suffer such awful circumstances? Honestly, the book is not entirely clear at this point and this question has been debated by theologians for centuries, so I will not try to end the debate now. I doubt that I could even if I tried. What is clear, however, is that it was not because of any sin on Job's part. He kept his heart clear and suffered a series of simply terrible events anyway.

What can we take from this? I think it is vitally important to be reminded that keeping a clean heart is not an insurance policy from bad things coming our way. Christians are still part of the human race, and bad things will happen to all of us at one time or another. Life is messy. What is clear is that bad things are not a punishment from an angry God for things known and unknown, remembered and forgotten, so encountering tough times is not a barometer of our spiritual condition. Don't let others pin that one on you.

* * *

What can we say about these stories from Scripture? First, when we are confronted by our own failures and downright sin, we have a choice as to how we will respond. The temptation, of course, is to vent and blame the messenger. At the end of the day, however, the redemptive course of action is to face up to our own behavior honestly and humbly, whatever the consequences for doing so may be. Second, keeping a clean heart is a personal challenge for all of us. We need not and should not appoint ourselves to be the community or church constable, assigned to watch for the missteps of others. We are called to be the lovers; God will be the judge. And finally, facing difficult times is not a reflection of our spiritual condition, although tough times can sometimes be the result of our own doing. Don't let others convince you that you have an unclean heart just because life happens. Honestly, life is messy and happens to all of us from time to time. Our call is to be faithful, not perfect.

Some Practical Advice

Although there have been some words of practical advice salted throughout this chapter, I do want to call specific attention to five practical things you can do when and while you pray for God's help to keep your heart clean. The first is to be sure that your heart is clean. In other words, examine your closet to see if there is anything there that has been stored away, begging to be addressed. If there is, take it out and haul it to the dump. As painful as it may be, this is where we must begin. I carried my theft of Mrs. Patterson's money for years, but it did not go away, would not go away. In the end, I'm glad it didn't. So, I ask, what is in your closet?

If we are truly after a clean heart, it is much better to prune away the dead wood than face a raging fire. Don't wait for the fire. Far too often, the fire will rage out of control, damaging far too many relationships and opportunities. Better to prune and prepare for new growth. That is, replace the deadwood with disciplines, habits, and practices that build your spirit and fill your cup.

Keeping a clean heart is a team sport, not a solo event. Of course, it takes humility and trust to share your struggles with someone, but keeping it all inside isn't a prescription for success either. Find a spiritual director, counselor, or trusted friend in whom you can confide and who will hold you accountable. Look for mentors and models. No need to go it

alone. In my view, if I'm going to climb a mountain, I want someone with me who has been to the top and knows the way up and back to base camp. Trusted relationships are a gift from God. We all need them.

Remember, there's a big difference between keeping our hearts clean and being perfect, a standard that no one can achieve and maintain. Don't be too hard on yourself or on others. If you slip up, correct the situation immediately, and remember that you are not called to be the moral police for your neighborhood or church. We're called to be the lovers; God will do the judging.

Look for God in all the usual places, and unexpected places, too. The promise is that the pure in heart shall see God. Believe it. Claim it. Count on it. Act on it. As we work to keep our hearts clean, we will see God being God—in our own lives, in the faces of others, and in our churches and communities. Take this promise and go on a daily God hunt. You won't be disappointed, I promise.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we've examined what it means to ask God to help us keep our hearts clean. As it turns out, if we are to have a clean heart we must clean out our spiritual closets, getting rid of those things that weigh us down and burden our spiritual journeys, even if no one else knows about them. As we emerge from difficult and even terrible times, we're happy to be out of the ditch and ready to head on down the road, but the reality is that most of us have some spiritual cleaning to do before we plan another trip. It's not realistic to work at keeping our hearts clean until we have a clean heart in the first place, and that takes some intentional work. And to be honest, there may be a price to pay along the way, but a clean heart is priceless.

At the end of the day, we rest on the promise that the pure in heart will see God, and we all want to see God—at work in our lives and in the lives of those around us, and in our neighborhoods and churches, too. The promise is that if we seek him, he will be found. Amen.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Most of us have some spiritual pruning or some closet cleaning to do. Do you? If so, what would be a good first step?

2. Do you have a mentor, role model, or Sherpa whom you trust to help you make the clean heart journey, and to help you stay on track? If not, where might one be found, knowing that it is not good to make this journey alone?
3. What could you do to bookend your day, starting each day with the conscious intention to keep a clean heart and ending each day with an honest evaluation and a grateful heart? Talk to a spiritual director or a trusted friend about how to get started if you are at a loss.
4. Why is it so easy for us to see the speck in the eye of someone else and so difficult to see the log in our own? How do we avoid becoming the spiritual police for our friends and neighbors instead of being the lovers and encouragers?
5. What if you embraced the promise that the pure in heart will see God, and then went on a heart-inspired God hunt for the next fifteen days? How could you set up reminders and markers for the hunt, and what do you think might happen? Are you willing to give it a try?

FOR TODAY

O God:

Give me strength to live another day;

Let me not turn coward before its difficulties or prove recreant to its duties;

Let me not lose faith in other people;

Keep me sweet and sound of heart in spite of ingratitude, treachery, and meanness;

Preserve me from minding little stings or giving them;

Help me to keep my heart clean . . .