

The Beatitudes, Part 6: The Pure In Heart

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In the physical realm those who care pursue pure things because it signifies they seek nothing but the best. Advertisers hustle their products as pure, claiming pure pleasure, pure satisfaction, pure sugar and pure soap. Animal breeders produce pure-blooded animals from dogs and cats to pigs. We consider pure gold and silver to have lasting value. Pure water is becoming a difficult commodity to find. People want to wear clothing of pure fabrics such as silk, cotton and wool because they are exquisite in appearance, comfort and endurance. Men in their hypocrisy want freedom when sowing their wild oats to consort with loose women, but when they marry, they desire a chaste, pure virgin, unsoiled by another man.

A good dictionary will define *pure* as "conforming absolutely to a standard of quality; faultless." When a thing is pure, it is unmixed, unalloyed, unadulterated, uncontaminated or undefiled by anything foreign to itself. Depending upon the context, it can take on such senses as clear, entire, true, perfect, sterling, chaste, virginal, immaculate, spotless, untainted, good, moral, impeccable, honorable, principled, ethical, guiltless, flawless, sincere and many more.

"Blessed are the pure in heart" (Matthew 5:8) is a beatitude expressing a standard that is extremely difficult to achieve. Relating strongly to much of what is written in the Old Testament, this standard is something the Pharisees vainly pursued through an obsessive observance of thousands of cultic rules they and others added to God's inspired Word. Their desire to achieve purity before God is commendable, but Jesus clearly demonstrates that they chose to do it the wrong way, leaving their hearts unchanged. In this vein Paul remarks:

Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God. (Romans 10:1-3)

Purity Through Ritual

In much of the Old Testament, purity by means of various rituals is generally presented as an adjunct of the sacrificial system. By this means holiness was established and protected within the Israelite communities. In His inspired Word, God Himself makes the distinctions between what is pure and impure. However, in the Psalms and the Prophets, as time advances toward the arrival of Jesus Christ, the standards for purity before God shift from merely ceremonial actions to moral conduct. Ceremonial purity gradually became seen as symbolic rather than genuine purity. By about 1000 BC, David understood this. He writes in Psalm 51:16-17: "For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give it; You do not delight in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart—these, O God, You will not despise."

This does not mean the various washings to attain a ritual purity were useless either to the ancient Israelites or to us under the New Covenant. Purity is closely associated with God's election of His

people, for by His grace He confers purity to them. However, the various washings teach that life, unless religiously maintained, is ever gravitating, ever slipping, toward impurity. Vigilance is the watchword regarding defilement.

The rituals teach that purity is achieved and maintained by effort and attention. Like dust and dirty dishes, uncleanness requires regular action and maintenance. Familiarity with the laws of uncleanness shows that defilement is readily communicable in a way that holiness is not. Uncleanness is so easily communicated that one can become unclean by unintentionally coming in contact with a corpse or a person with an infectious disease.

Haggai 2:11-14 illustrates the impossibility of holiness being transferred from one to another, and by contrast, how easily defilement is transmitted:

"Thus says the LORD of hosts: 'Now, ask the priests concerning the law, saying, "If one carries holy meat in the fold of his garment, and with the edge he touches bread or stew, wine or oil, or any food, will it become holy?"' Then the priests answered and said, "No." And Haggai said, "If one who is unclean because of a dead body touches any of these, will it be unclean?" So the priests answered and said, "It shall be unclean." Then Haggai answered and said, "'So is this people, and so is this nation before Me,' says the LORD, 'and so is every work of their hands; and what they offer there is unclean.'"

The sanctity of something or someone dedicated to God cannot be transferred merely by contact with another. However, the defilement of an unclean thing transfers easily to the clean, defiling it!

Washing is the primary means of ceremonial purity. From these biblical examples, John Wesley's well-known comment, "Cleanliness is next to godliness," arose. He realized that cleanliness is somehow related to what God is like and that personal hygiene has a spiritual dimension. Indeed, the very first mention of washing in Scripture is when Abraham's hospitality to his three visitors includes providing water to wash their feet (Genesis 18:4). This symbol of hospitality and servanthood reaches its zenith when Jesus includes it as part of the New Covenant Passover ritual.

More Than Removing Dirt

Washing's sacramental meaning and use extend far beyond merely removing physical uncleanness. Israel's preparations for meeting God at Mount Sinai and making the covenant included washing their clothing (Exodus 19:14). Biblically, a person's clothing frequently stands as an external symbol of what he is inwardly. Thus, in Revelation 19:8, the bride of Christ is "granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints."

The Israelites had to present themselves to the terrifying and holy God, an act that could have resulted in their deaths despite being His treasured possession (Exodus 19:5). Washing accentuated to them the vast difference between the Creator and them, between the holy and unholy. Though they were only clean externally at best, the washing also taught them what God required of them to serve Him. Isaiah later specifically refers to this requirement: "Depart! Depart! Go out from there, touch no unclean thing; go out from the midst of her, be clean, you who bear the vessels of the LORD" (Isaiah 52:11).

As God's revelation became more complete, washing expanded to include parts of sacrificial animals (Exodus 29:17), blood-spattered priestly garments (Leviticus 6:27), the hands and feet of the priests

(Exodus 30:1-21), those who touched a corpse (Leviticus 11:25, 39-40), situations regarding leprosy (Leviticus 13:53-59), and male and female bodily discharges (Leviticus 15). Though some of these may on the surface seem to involve only physical hygiene, the deeper significance involves ritual cleanliness, and thus symbolically, spiritual purity.

Gradually, physical washings became associated with the need for inward spiritual cleansing. David writes, "Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. . . . Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. . . . Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me" (Psalm 51:2, 7, 10).

Isaiah 4:3-4 describes a similar washing that God performs:

And it shall come to pass that he who is left in Zion and he who remains in Jerusalem will be called holy—everyone who is recorded among the living in Jerusalem. When the Lord has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion, and purged the blood of Jerusalem from her midst, by the spirit of judgment and by the spirit of burning.

Conversely, other verses reveal that we also have a responsibility to fulfill in this spiritual washing: "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes" (Isaiah 1:16). "O Jerusalem, wash your heart from wickedness, that you may be saved. How long shall your evil thoughts lodge within you?" (Jeremiah 4:14).

One of Israel's great tragedies was that so few perceived the spiritual intent beyond the external washings. To them, the external symbol was the reality, permitting them to conceive all kinds of evil in their hearts and do them, then perform a physical cleansing and think themselves free and clear of sin. Jesus confronts this on a number of occasions, specifically in Matthew 15 and Mark 7, but nowhere does He more directly condemn their failure in this matter than in Matthew 23:25-28:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisees, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

Even Pontius Pilate tried to assuage his conscience by practicing the common, empty ritual of washing his hands to be "free" of condemning Jesus, an innocent man, to His death (Matthew 27:24). This act may have meant something to him and others near enough to know what he was doing, but in reality he was still guilty of failing to do his duty as judge, that is, free a man he knew to be innocent.

Another series of verses containing a vivid word picture of the spiritual ineffectiveness of the external washings is II Peter 2:20-22:

For if, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning. For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy

commandment delivered to them. But it has happened to them according to the true proverb: "A dog returns to his own vomit," and "a sow, having washed, to her wallowing in the mire."

No matter how clean we are on the outside, if the inside, the nature, the heart, remains unchanged, or if we resort again to habitual sin, we will return to what we came from and once more be filthy both inside and out.

Jesus and the Initial Cleansing

Hebrews 10:1, 3 confirms that the Old Covenant ceremonies taught routines of symbolical importance but could not perform the purifying functions they pointed to:

For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with these same sacrifices, which they offer continually year by year, make those who approach perfect. . . . But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year.

The end of the Old Covenant sacramental washings to achieve purity arrived with the work of Jesus Christ. Notice John 1:29: "The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, 'Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!'" Throughout the Bible, some form of sin, mentioned or not, is the cause of defilement either directly or indirectly. It can affect either or both the interior and exterior of a person. Without the removal of sin, defilement will always be present. So its removal from the human heart and environment is the solution to the problem of being and remaining free from its pollutions.

I John 1:7 specifically declares, "But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin." Here, Jesus' blood shed during His crucifixion is symbolically presented as the active agent of cleansing.

Hebrews 9:11-14 and 10:4 draw the picture more clearly:

But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? . . . For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins.

Jesus, Sanctification and Cleansing

It is tempting for the careless to consider the purification process complete with the initial cleansing that comes through God's grace and faith in Christ's sacrifice. But the New Testament provides considerable evidence that God's purification process is at that point far from finished—in fact, it has only begun!

At this stage in the fulfillment of God's purpose in a convert's life, purity becomes associated with sanctification, also called holiness and going on to perfection. These terms basically refer to the same thing. After baptism and receipt of God's Spirit, human nature remains, and with it the seeds of continued defilement. Remember, the Bible shows that defilement comes easily. The convert's human nature stands ready to do its evil work. And it does! Its daily stains must be removed; we must overcome it and root it out as we go on to perfection.

How Often Should We Wash?

The Bible furnishes a multitude of scriptures about how the work of Jesus Christ as High Priest, the Holy Spirit and the Word of God play a part in bringing us to purity of heart. Some of these verses reveal daily cleansing, others once a year, and others only once a lifetime. But all are important to the process. We probably wash some part of our body every day. As spiritual cleansing is certainly no less important, we should be doing it every day as well.

A well-known section on this subject is John 13:6-11:

Then He came to Simon Peter. And Peter said to Him, "Lord, are You washing my feet?" Jesus answered and said to him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this." Peter said to Him, "You shall never wash my feet!" Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me." Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, not my feet only, but my hands and my head!" Jesus said to him, "He who is bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you." For He knew who would betray Him; therefore He said, "You are not all clean."

Passover, in part, is an annual renewal of our initial washing through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ from the defilement of sin. It serves not only as a reminder of this, but also that our daily walk, symbolically represented by our dirty feet, needs to be cleaned as it becomes defiled. It is noteworthy that Peter later writes that we, as a holy priesthood, are to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (I Peter 2:5).

In the Old Testament ritual, the priests who served at the Tabernacle and Temple had to wash both hands and feet in the laver prior to serving before God lest they die (Exodus 30:18-21)! Hebrews 7:26-28 reinforces this thought:

For such a High Priest was fitting for us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and has become higher than the heavens; who does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people's, for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. For the law appoints as high priests men who have weakness, but the word of the oath, which came after the law, appoints the Son who has been perfected forever.

Though the author speaks specifically of the high priest, all priests who ministered before God were included within the scope of this law. Clearly, God is vitally concerned about the purity of heart, character, attitude, motive and service of those who serve Him. Because we are to serve Him every day, this requires specific and continuing daily attention.

The Holy Spirit, Truth and God's Word

Besides Christ's work as High Priest, the Bible also refers to the Holy Spirit, truth and the Word of God as sources or means of cleansing. Notice in the following scriptures how these resources support this ongoing process:

- » **Titus 3:5-6:** ". . . not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, which He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Lord."
- » **John 14:16-17:** "And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever—even the Spirit of truth, which the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him, but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you."
- » **John 16:13:** "However, when it, the Spirit of truth, has come, it will guide you into all truth; for it will not speak on its own authority, but what ever it hears it will speak; and it will tell you things to come."
- » **John 17:17:** "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth."
- » **John 15:3:** "You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you."
- » **Ephesians 5:25-26:** "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for it, that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word."

All these elements are parts of God's creative efforts working together to bring about transformation of the sons of God into His image. Many verses speak of "renewing" along with transformation. Renewing suggests a fresh, clean start on the path of life after a period of filth and defilement. Paul speaks of both in Romans 12:2: "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God." He mentions it again in a similar context in Ephesians 4:22-24: ". . . that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness." Again, in II Corinthians 4:16, he shows renewing, getting a fresh start, to be a daily responsibility of this way of life: "Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day."

Finally, in I John 3:1-3, God makes sure we understand that each person plays a major role in keeping himself pure:

Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.

Purity of Heart

With that background, we are ready to look more directly at this beatitude, understanding how greatly God desires purity in all we think, say and do. The heart is central to this because in the Bible the heart stands for the seat, source, reservoir and instigator of our thoughts, attitudes, desires, character and motivation. It is synonymous with our modern use of "mind," since the mind is where we hold knowledge, attitudes, motivations, affections, desires, likes and dislikes.

Jesus says in Matthew 5:8, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." Obviously, the quality of the heart is the issue in this beatitude. Proverbs 4:23 reads, "Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life." Our Father directly addresses the book of Proverbs to His sons (Proverbs 1:7). It assumes our hearts have been purified by His initial cleansing, that we have received His Spirit and are in the process of sanctification and going on to perfection. Ezekiel explains this process:

Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. (Ezekiel 36:25-27)

This does not all take place in an instant. It is a process, and as we have all discovered from Scripture and own experience since baptism, human nature is still very much alive within us (Romans 7:13-25). Paul confirms this in Galatians 5:17, "For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you cannot do the things that you wish."

Human nature, the law of sin within us, is always seeking to pull us again into the defilement of sin, seeking to destroy our hope of sharing life with the holy God. That is why God counsels us in Proverbs 4:23 to keep—that is, guard, preserve, and maintain—our heart. It is very easy to become defiled by lapsing back to old habits. In stark reality, Romans 8:7 and Jeremiah 17:9 show why: "Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be." "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?" The normal human mind deceitfully convinces each person that they are good and love God, men and law. But the reality is just the opposite: It is at war with God and men, and hates God's holy, righteous and spiritual law. It loves itself and its desires far more than anything else. It is this deceitful, self-centered enmity that exerts constant influence, pulling us into the defilement of sin.

Jesus preaches on this in Matthew 15:16-20:

So Jesus said, "Are you also still without understanding? Do you not yet understand that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and is eliminated? But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man."

It is sin that defiles holiness. In terms of character, of being in the image of God, sin defiles, pollutes, contaminates or blurs the reflection of God in us. "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (I John 1:8).

A Work in Progress

Purity of heart is a work in progress in which both God and man share responsibility. Many scriptures show that God will cleanse by pardoning sin. But our responsibility in cleansing is very important and frequently mentioned along with what we must do to be cleansed. Notice how clearly James shows purifying is our responsibility: "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded" (James 4:8).

How is this purifying done? I Peter 1:22 makes a summary statement: "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." Obedience to the truth through the Spirit purifies our character by inculcating right habits within it.

After commanding us to clean ourselves up, Isaiah adds, "Put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rebuke the oppressor; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow" (Isaiah 1:16-17). Likewise, after admonishing us to guard our heart, our Father says:

Put away from you a deceitful mouth, and put perverse lips far from you. Let your eyes look straight ahead, and your eyelids look right before you. Ponder the path of your feet, and let all your ways be established. Do not turn to the right or the left; remove your foot from evil. (Proverbs 4:24-27)

Jeremiah 4:14 adds, "O Jerusalem, wash your heart from wickedness, that you may be saved. How long shall your evil thoughts lodge within you?"

Psalms 24:3-4 asks a searching question and gives a clear and important answer to all of us: "Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? Or who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not lifted up his soul to an idol, nor sworn deceitfully." These two brief verses broadly cover conduct, motivation, attitude and how a person prioritizes his life.

To meet these qualifications requires "truth in the inward parts" (Psalm 51:6). A deceitful heart will never meet the standards because it does not operate from a foundation of godly integrity. David says in verse 5 that, humanly, he was shaped in iniquity. God, with our cooperation through faith, is ultimately the Creator of a pure heart in us, but it is a protracted process achieved by imparting a holy nature by His Spirit. This unites us with a holy Christ, with whom we fellowship, washing us in the blood of the Lamb so that with His aid we can mortify the flesh and live toward God, giving Him first priority in everything.

We will never be pure as God is pure in this life. Our purity is at best only in part. We are partly purified from our former darkness; our will is partly purified from its rebellion; our desires are partly purified from desires, avarice and pride. But the work of cleansing has begun, and God is faithful to finish what He starts (Philippians 1:6).

Interestingly, when Peter refers to God's calling of Gentiles in Acts 15:9, he says God "made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith." He uses "purifying" in the sense of a continuous experience. In Titus 3:5, Paul also uses "renewing of the Holy Spirit" in the same ongoing sense. We must see purity of heart in this sense because as James 3:2, 8 states, "For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body. . . . But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison." By daily denying the self, sincerely confessing and wholehearted obedience, we work toward purity.

However, it is not enough to be pure in words and outward conduct. Purity of desires, motives and intents should characterize the child of God. We need to examine ourselves, searching diligently whether we have freed ourselves from the dominion of hypocrisy. Are our affections set on things above? Has the fear of the Lord grown strong enough that we love what He loves and hate what He hates? Are we conscious of and do we deeply grieve over the filth we yet find within ourselves? Are

we conscious of our foul thoughts, vile imaginations, evil desires? Do we mourn over our pride? Perhaps the heaviest burden of a pure heart is seeing the ocean of unclean things still in him, casting its filth into his life and fouling what he does.

Do We See God?

This beatitude, like all the others, has both a present and future fulfillment. Paul says in I Corinthians 13:12, "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known." To "see" God is to be brought close to Him. In this instance the sense is that what we are far from cannot be clearly distinguished. That, as sinners, we are far from God is proclaimed in Isaiah 59:2: "But your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He will not hear." Thus James 4:8 admonishes us, "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you."

The pure in heart are those who with all their being seek to remain free of every form of the defilement of sin. The fruit of this is the blessing of spiritual discernment. With spiritual understanding, they have clear views of God's character, will and attributes. A pure heart is synonymous with what Jesus calls a "single" (KJV) or "clear" (NKJV margin) eye in Matthew 6:22. When a person has this mind, the whole body is full of light. Where there is light, one can see clearly.

The sense of this beatitude's promise to see God carries over into the Kingdom of God. In one sense, all will see God, as Revelation 1:7 prophesies: "Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him, even they also who pierced Him. And all the tribes of earth will mourn because of Him." They will see Him as Judge.

Jesus' promise, though, is stated as a blessing, a favor. Revelation 22:4 says of those who will inherit God's Kingdom, "They shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads." I John 3:2 reads, "We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is." To see someone's face is to be so near as to be in his presence. In this case, the term indicated the highest of honors: to stand in the presence of the King of kings. Certainly David understood the greatness of this: "As for me, I will see Your face in righteousness; I shall be satisfied when I awake in Your likeness" (Psalm 17:15).

As we have seen, God places great value on being clean, especially in terms of purity of heart. Also, we can easily become defiled, whereas remaining clean requires constant vigilance, a determined discipline and a clear vision of what lies before us to serve as a prod to keep us on track. Since it is sin that defiles, this beatitude demands from us the most exacting self-examination. Are our work and service done from selfless motives or from a desire for self-display? Is our church-going a sincere attempt to meet God or merely fulfilling a respectable habit? Are our prayers and Bible study a heartfelt desire to commune with God, or do we pursue them because they make us feel pleasantly superior? Is our life lived with a conscious need of God, or are we merely seeking comfort in our piety?

To examine our motives honestly can be a daunting and shaming but very necessary discipline, but considering Christ's promise in this beatitude, it is well worth whatever effort and humbling of self it takes. It is good for us to keep Paul's admonishment found in II Corinthians 7:1 fresh in mind: "Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God."