



Chapter 4

Authentic to Be Accepted

When my grandfather died, I went home for the funeral. I took with me some dress slacks that I needed to have cleaned for the visitation. Driving around, I found a place called One Hour Cleaners. That sounded perfect because I needed those slacks that very evening.

I walked in with my laundry on a coat hanger and smiled at the woman behind the counter. "I'm from out of town, and I'm really glad to find this place," I said. "One Hour Cleaners, right?"

"Yes, sir. That's us."

"Just to make sure we're on the same page, you can do these pants, right?"

"Of course we can. Yes, sir."

"So I can leave them with you right now. Then I can go get some other things done, then come pick them up in an hour or so, right?"

"No, sir," she said, squinting as if I'd said something odd. "But you can pick them up tomorrow."

"Um, but your sign says One Hour Cleaners." I pointed through the window to substantiate my charge.

She chomped her chewing gum a few times, then said, "Yeah, but we don't clean clothes in one hour."

“Then shouldn’t this business be called Next Day Cleaners? Or Whenever It’s Done Cleaners?”

She just chewed her gum and squinted at me. Clearly this was a strange new request by a customer. Laundry back in an hour from One Hour Cleaners? What will they be demanding next?

I tried discussing it with her, always politely, from several angles, hoping we could at least enjoy the irony of it together. But she saw nothing remarkable about the situation. I wanted to say, “I don’t think those words mean what you think they mean.” This was my hometown. Maybe I’d been away too long and the language had evolved beyond my understanding in these parts.

Or maybe it was just another case of false advertising. Nobody likes it when someone advertises one thing and delivers another—commercially or otherwise. The outside of the establishment should give us an accurate expectation of what we’ll find on the inside.

Then again, once we apply this to ourselves, it’s a little different. It’s one thing to talk about businesses with false claims. It’s another to look in the mirror and ask whether we really show the world exactly who we are.

We struggle with authenticity because we fear rejection. We want the world to see us at our very best, because then people are more likely to accept and possibly even admire us.

Maybe we don’t need to try so hard or hide any of our blemishes. Maybe people will like us just the way we are. It’s even possible they’ll be *more* drawn to us if they know some of our failings and struggles. They could say, “I’m like that too. I have the same issues. I’m glad to know there are two of us.”

But that’s a risk we won’t take. Fear is the enemy of transparency. We don’t like our flaws, and we don’t expect anybody else to. So we work hard at putting up the most impressive front we can.

Then we come back to that sermon Jesus preached on the mountain side. Before moving on from the Beatitudes, let’s examine one more of these upside-down blessings.

Jesus has been telling us that the kingdom of God is in favor of the ones at the bottom of the heap, the ones who are last instead of first; the poor in spirit, not the arrogant and powerful; the meek and gentle, not the pushy and overbearing.

In that sermon, Jesus actually has a lot to say about the difference between the outside and the inside. He says what really matters to God is what’s inside, where we transact our real business.

He says people spend a lot of time working on their signage for the world to see, but God comes right in to see what our true policies are.

Jesus puts it this way:

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

(Matt. 5:8)

Pure in heart. That’s something to think about, isn’t it? It means you’re living the blessed life when you stop worrying about the signs and the extravagant advertising and all the effort expended trying to convince people you’re something different than you are. When the inside and outside match up, you’re pure in heart and you’re where he wants you to be.

Getting to the end of me means I’m not worried about performing for others anymore. Getting to the end of me means I’m

no longer interested in faking it, because I understand that God is looking for the real me.

Pure and Unmixed

What does it mean to have a pure heart?

As soon as Jesus spoke this word *pure*, bells and buzzers sounded for those listening. If any one word captured what religion was all about in that culture, it was *purity*. To be pure was to be clean and not infected with the wrong things. But the Pharisees and other religious leaders defined it almost completely in terms of things other people could see. It had become a matter of keeping so many rules. You don't eat certain foods, as everyone had known since the earliest days of Israel, when God gave Moses the laws. "Unclean" food made *you* unclean.

That was long established. But you also didn't eat with "unclean" people, meaning Gentiles. That also made you unclean. But Jesus did that all the time.

The Pharisees took tremendous pains to show they were pure, and they also took tremendous pains to make sure others did the same. But Jesus was challenging their entire concept of what was pure and clean. At one point, in Matthew 23, he told them they were too worried about cleaning "the outside of the cup" (v. 25) while the inside was filthy. Then—and you know this one wasn't too popular—he compared them, the leaders, to "whitewashed tombs," which were sparkling and bright on the outside but filled with death and decay on the inside (v. 27).

Pretty harsh words, but they illustrated where Jesus thought it most important to be clean and pure. Painting and exteriors are nice,

but it's the interior that counts. A great part of the upside-down, inside-out message of Jesus is that God doesn't look so much on the outside, which is so easy to fake. He looks more on the inside, where we are what we are.

So Jesus drops the well-worn word *pure* into his sermon and then gives it a dramatic new spin. People need to stop worrying about their outward appearance and realize that God sees inside us. Purity of heart over purity of decoration.

As for the word *purity* itself, there are two words that capture what it means. First of all it means *unmixed*: no bad ingredients thrown in.

When I was in grade school, we had a game in our neighborhood. We'd raid the pantry and find all kinds of food to mix in a blender. We'd put in eggs, peanut butter, ketchup, mustard, cottage cheese, and anything else we could get our hands on. Surprisingly enough, my mother was okay with this, as long as we followed two rules:

1. Everything we put into the blender had to be edible. No dirt, rocks, or metal. Items like shaving cream fell into the gray area.
2. We had to eat one spoonful of the final concoction.

That's why this game quickly lost its appeal. We got results that looked and smelled awful, and tasted even worse.

Sometimes I wonder if my heart resembles our blender game. It's certainly not pure and unmixed. What about you? What ingredients have you poured into the blender of your heart?

The New Testament has a lot to say about the kinds of things we put inside us. For example, Paul tells us, “Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things” (Phil. 4:8). When you pour in the right ingredients and avoid the others, you find it’s a recipe that pleases God. Proverbs 11:20 says, “The LORD detests people with crooked hearts, but he delights in those with integrity” (NLT).

Sincere

We also might use the word *sincere* to describe a pure heart.

When Jesus speaks of a pure heart, he’s talking about one that is honest and has no little ugly places hidden within it.

In Matthew 5, as we’ve already discussed, Jesus begins his ministry by offering us a list of blessings, which we call the Beatitudes. But he ends his ministry by offering a list of “woes” in Matthew 23. This includes the references to cups and whitewashed tombs previously mentioned. At this point, the time for his arrest is drawing near and he knows he has only a few days left on earth. He is preaching in the temple, and he aims his message squarely at the Pharisees and their hypocrisy by saying, “Everything they do is done for people to see” (v. 5). Hypocrisy is the opposite of sincerity. Jesus also quotes Isaiah, saying of the hypocrites, “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me” (Matt. 15:8).

So don’t miss this. Jesus begins his ministry by saying, “Blessed are the pure in heart.” He ends it by saying, “Woe to you, . . . you

hypocrites!” The word *woe*, of course, is the opposite of *blessed*. It’s also an expression of grief. Jesus is telling us that the best things come from God to those who have pure hearts, unmixed and sincere; the worst things come to those who play the blender game.

Earning Our Stars

Jesus says more about purity of heart in Matthew 6:

Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. (v. 1)

In the kingdom economy, a lot is determined by the audience you choose. If you’re most interested in what other people think, then their applause or attention is your reward. If they say you’re a tremendous human being, then that’s your reward. You’ve been paid in full, and you shouldn’t look for any further commendation from God.

But coming to the end of me means I am through with that charade and the emptiness of it. Instead, I seek only to please God—I receive my reward from him instead of from people. When we close the public theater, drop the curtains, shut off the lights, and play to an audience of one, not caring about the reviews of the critics or anyone else, that’s when we come to the end of ourselves and experience God’s blessing.

I attended Sunday school every week when I was growing up. I remember how our classroom had a sicker chart that allowed the

teacher to keep track of all the leading indicators of Sunday school excellence. You got a sticker for coming to church, for instance. You got another one for bringing a Bible, and yet another for bringing a little envelope with an offering in it. If you brought a friend with you, that was worth another sticker.

It was just a little sticky star, and it bought me no candy or free prizes or anything else apart from credit on the wall poster. Even so, there was something motivational about seeing the stars on my poster. People are naturally competitive, and if you put the names of all the kids together and create “standings,” we start trying to win. It’s human nature.

I remember trying to get those stars and beginning to define my faith by whether my Bible was in my hand and whether the offering envelope was sticking out of my Bible. If we missed church, that was a whole row of stars I lost out on for the day. So it was an effective strategy for teaching us good habits. The problem comes when we metabolize a habit into a philosophy and come to believe that our faith is defined by things we do with no reference to the heart.

Even as adults, we look around at other people and mentally give—or don’t give—them stickers. Maybe that guy over there brought his ragged Bible from childhood rather than the cool translation of the day in the nice embroidered cover, so you mentally dock him a star for that. That lady over there attends a home Bible study group, so she gets an extra star. We evaluate others by their outside signage.

Jesus criticized the religious leaders because they were consumed by appearances. “Everything they do is done for people to see” (Matt. 23:5). Jesus had a lot to say about how the Pharisees made great

public performances out of praying and fasting. They painted their faces, they doused themselves in ashes, and they made sure everyone saw their shows of righteousness. It seems to us that it must have been an odd sight to see the street performance art of the religious leaders. But I wonder if we do the same thing.

When we bow to give thanks in a restaurant, how unmixed and sincere are our hearts? Are we thinking entirely about God and his provision of the meal, or is some part of us thinking about how we appear to others present?

When we raise our hand to volunteer for a project at church, how much of the heart is allocated to pleasing God, and how much is concerned with who is watching and how impressed they may be?

Do we wonder who’s watching us as the offering plate goes by? When we stand to pray publicly, are the words geared to God’s ear or to those listening?

#lookatme

In the last chapter I mentioned that social media can contribute to our tendency to be too concerned with what others think. I want to unpack that idea a little more, but first I want to make sure you understand that I’m not anti-social media. I think it can serve a valuable purpose, but here’s what I’ve observed. Social media is about the control of appearances. I believe Facebook, Twitter, and the rest can be very useful to God’s kingdom, but we need to be thinking and praying about social media, because it really plays to our preoccupations with the opinions of others.

Let's say you go on a vacation with your family. There are certain things you post and certain things you don't. Picture of happy family on beach?[†] Post it! Fighting in the car on the way to the beach? That one never appears on Instagram.

You post, "Date night with hubby?" and with it, a picture of the two of you gazing lovingly into each other's eyes. And of course you add a humble caption about marrying way up.

Nobody posts that Monday morning picture: two grumpy people, snarling—her with hair in curlers, him with shaving cuts—and needing a little space from each other.

So many of the people behind these idyllic social media identities actually need prayer rather than quick love bombs: for bills they can't pay, conflicts they can't soften, and family members they're worried about. We don't intend dishonesty. We're simply being positive people who want to share our lives and our work. But the screen on the phone or computer seems to lend itself to performance over transparency.

It used to be that family Christmas letters were the great repository of public posturing. "Here's a picture of our happy, laughing family and an account of our incredible accomplishments during the year—written from the point of view of our adorable puppy!"

Those letters are still sent out, but today we're shifting more to social media, which is like a little stream of "happy-talk Christmas letter" self-promotion all through the year. If we become consumed by Tweeting out messages, it changes our focus. We're now putting a great deal of time into practicing our righteousness before the world.

[†] Wearing khakis and white shirts? I thought so.

I think the Pharisees would have had huge followings on Twitter. People would have cheered them on as they fasted and pointed out that this was their five thousandth straight day without a violation of the Mosaic Law. "Love you all!" folks would comment. "Great job chastising those lepers! Wish I'd been there!"

Another Pharisee would post, "I'm live-blogging my weeping and wailing. Don't forget to leave comments!" And others would cheer him on, which of course doesn't much enhance weeping and wailing.

I saw a T-shirt I liked. It said, "May your life someday be as awesome as you make it appear to be on Facebook." How important is our appearance on social media to us? And what does that say about purity of heart?

Maybe it's a good thing if it accelerates the process of burning us out on performance—of bringing us closer to the end of ourselves. It's exhausting trying to play a part. Writing before the advent of social media, John Stott observed,

Yet how few of us live one life and live it in the open! We are tempted to wear a different mask and play a different role according to each occasion. This is not reality but play-acting, which is the essence of hypocrisy. Some people weave round themselves such a tissue of lies that they can no longer tell which part of them is real and which is make-believe.¹

Jesus calls us to live one life and live it out in the open. His name for that is purity of heart, and his reward for that is a rich and fulfilling blessing in life.

Faith and High Fashion

Hypocrites are the opposite of those who are pure in heart. Jesus wanted his people to demonstrate through their lives the power and grace of God, but the leaders turned it into a cheap form of theater that called attention to the actor.

The religious leaders judged the inside by the outside. If you played by the right rules, it meant you were godly and worthy to pass their test. They even measured faith by the choice of clothing. Listen to Jesus:

Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long. (Matt. 23:5)

Phylacteries were leather boxes containing bits of parchment inscribed with Scripture verses. It was a response to the Old Testament verses, found in Deuteronomy, about binding God's Word to one's arms and foreheads. The real meaning, of course, is for us to bury his Word in our hearts so we can carry it with us everywhere we go.

But the leaders decided this was something to practice in the literal sense. So they wore two black boxes, one on the forehead and the other on the left arm. As you can imagine, once that was established, there was a gradual trend toward bigger boxes to show bigger righteousness. As in, "Now, *there's* a righteous Pharisee—look at the size of the black box on his forehead!"

Then came "the tassels on their garments." The Old Testament referred to garments having a border with a blue ribbon. Again, the Pharisees decided wider ribbons would make a broader statement.

The Pharisees were all about signage. If neon had been invented, they would have worked it into their garb—maybe blinking neon arrows that said, "God likes this guy!"

Some people still believe God is deeply concerned about their Sunday best when they dress for church. "I'm dressing for God," they say, "so I'm going to wear my very best clothing." And there's nothing wrong with that—as long as we're truly unconcerned about others being impressed with a new suit or dress and as long as we recall that "people look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7).

He wants authenticity in our worship, our relationships, and in everything about us—one life lived out in the open. Woe to you, Jesus says, if you equate outward appearance with eternal standing. Woe to you if you judge someone's faith by your own sense of style. Woe to you for turning the walk of faith into a red-carpet fashion show. And woe to you if you spend more time primping for church than you do in prayer and seeking to know him better.

I've been on many airline flights, but only once in first class. And that was one time too many. Once you've been up behind the curtain, in the flight version of the Holy of Holies, then coach class loses all its appeal.

On my one encounter, I was on an overbooked flight. Some of us were moved to first class just to fit everyone on the plane. I was pleased, to say the least. As people filed by on their way to coach—the huddled masses—I tried to give them sympathetic looks. I'd received my share of those in the past. Then, instead of studying my message for the speaking engagement ahead of me, I began looking around to figure out who didn't belong up there.

To be honest, I didn't think most of them should be among us elite. One guy had an earring, long hair, and tattoos. I felt disrespected. And when a guy took off his shoes midflight, revealing a hole in his sock, I could only shake my head. And I won't talk about the woman who used poor manners while eating, right down to asking if she could have the can with her drink. Four out of five of those people just weren't first-class material. There are standards, you know.

Worrying about appearances has that effect on us. I ran into a friend at a show in downtown Louisville a few years ago, and we stood in the aisle and chatted. He had pretty long hair;[†] he was fairly grungy, actually. This was on a Saturday night, and the next morning at church, a group of people stopped me in the lobby. They'd seen me on the previous night at the show, and one of them said, "We saw you talking to that rough-looking young man. We were all proud of you for having friends like that, and we prayed for the young man."

For a moment I couldn't figure out what they were talking about. Then, as I walked away, I realized they meant my long-haired, grungy friend—who happened to be none other than the worship leader for our college ministry, and also, ironically, one of the most pure-hearted and humble men I've been around. But on account of his appearance, these folks were praying for his lost soul.

Some would argue that dress is a way to honor tradition, which is important. And that's fine, but notice that this was actually one of Jesus's criticisms of the religious leaders. Tradition had become more

[†] To clarify, I'm not saying his long hair was pretty. I'm saying it was longer than what would typically be thought of as long hair.

important than people. God wants us to open a place of worship that is a hospital for the hurting rather than a first-class compartment for the heaven-bound.

Rehearsing Lines

In Matthew 6 Jesus gives another example of an impure, inauthentic heart.

When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others.... But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." (vv. 5–6)

For many of the Jews, prayer had become a formal, lifeless ritual. As one example, they were to recite the *Shema* every morning before nine o'clock and every evening before nine o'clock. It didn't matter where you found yourself at that time of day—at home, on the street, at work. You stopped and said your *Shema*. It had become an act we would refer to as "vain repetition"—reciting words out of ritual, without really thinking about them.

The second prayer that every Jew had to repeat each day was called the *Shemoneh Esreh*, which means "the eighteen" because it was a group of eighteen prayers. They were to say these scripted prayers three times a day.

The Jews had a special prayer for every occasion. They had prayers before each meal, prayers for the new moon, prayers for receiving good news, prayers for entering or leaving a city. The longer the prayers, the more effective they were, or so people thought. It was a very convenient system, since everything was prewritten. All they had to provide was the mouth.

Jesus saw things differently. He said that when we talk to God, we simply need to be who we are—to be authentic and to talk to him as we would talk to someone we love.

Many of us have struck spiritual poses in our prayers. We have a hard time being ourselves. Praying before others, we have a tendency to talk more to the people in the room than to God. Even in private prayer, sincerity doesn't come easily. We talk to God as if he requires formal language, as we would talk to some governmental authority we didn't know well. Or we speak in a kind of fake biblical language we've cobbled together from the Scriptures or other embellished prayers we've heard. Prayer becomes a performance, and we have to work at it.

God simply wants us to talk with him. Talk is simple communion, and it doesn't need to be dressed up. We should talk to him as we'd talk to a best friend—simply being ourselves, being totally honest without worrying how it might sound.

Have you ever listened to a public prayer and really liked a turn of phrase? And you thought to yourself, *That's awesome—I'm going to put that into my prayer repertoire!* We pick up phrases like these: *traveling mercies; lead, guide, and direct; the nourishment of our bodies.* Perhaps we believe those are special phrases that establish some kind of spiritual superiority. But it's not God's language. He wants to hear from the real me and the real you.

Who we're pretending to be doesn't match who we are on the inside. Yet what he asks could not be simpler. His invitation says, "Come as you are. Please don't dress up. Don't decorate your language. Don't put on a show. Just be at home with me. Be real. My place is your place."

Our ingrained mask-wearing keeps us from having the authentic, intimate relationship that Jesus wants to have with us. What if you put on this kind of show with your spouse, dressing things up and trying to be someone you aren't? A wife would feel she needed to be in her finest clothing with all her cosmetics on at every single moment. A husband would believe he had to put on a show as well. Both would speak to each other as they'd speak to someone on a first date, dancing around things, worried about saying the wrong words. Marriage would be totally exhausting and utterly unsatisfying. After a few weeks of it we'd be hiding from each other.

What we love in marriage is the utter relaxation, the complete intimacy we enjoy with each other. We let down our hair, we stop hiding our warts, and we say whatever is on our minds. Why can't we be that way with God?

Getting to the end of me means I don't need to hide my flaws because I know his love is unconditional. And we'll be deeply satisfied, deeply fulfilled, because it's so much easier to be one person than two—so much easier not to create and sustain a false identity.

My relationship with my wife became more intimate the first time I saw her without makeup, with her hair pulled back in a ponytail. At that point, we were a little more comfortable with each other. We were starting to relax and say what we thought. That's when it became a true relationship rather than an audition.

Sometimes, on date nights, it's still fun to get dressed up and go somewhere that requires perfect manners. But my wife is most beautiful to me in jeans and a sweatshirt, with her hair pulled back, because then I know I'm seeing her at her most relaxed, her most completely authentic self.

Jesus wants a no-makeup relationship with you. He wants you to be pure in heart—unmixed and soul-sincere.

Exit Stage

Jesus says in Matthew 23:3 that hypocrites “do not practice what they preach.”

This week I watched an old TV show called *Faking It* on the Internet. This show was built around the premise of training a person to be something he or she really wasn't. For example, on one episode a guy named Patrick Nesbitt was a very comfortable real estate developer in L.A. But he spent a month training to work on a western ranch as a cowboy.

Another contestant was Lesley Townsend, a self-confessed geek who enjoyed books more than people. The show transformed her into a perky NFL cheerleader. And David Dougherty was a carpenter from a small eastern town. On *Faking It*, he became a Beverly Hills interior designer.

These guests all learned their roles, then lined up against people who were authentic at those careers. Professional judges had to spot the imposter. Who was the real cowboy? The real cheerleader? The real interior designer? I had to admit it was fun watching these people doing their best to fake it, but I got tired watching all their exertion.

As I watched the show, I wondered how many people I know live this way. How many are exhausting themselves trying to be something they really aren't?

That's not a blessed life but a miserable one. Woe unto those who play the game, trying to inflate their reputations by being someone they're not. They will ultimately collapse from sheer exhaustion, their pretenses collapsing with them.

You need to understand that I'm writing this as a memo to myself as well as to anyone else. I don't try to fake it; nobody does. But it's so easy for me put on a show, add a little extra, be more than I am. Every instinct I have tells me to cover my sin deeply, to stamp a big smile across my face, and to give the impression that I have all the answers. But getting to the end of me means getting over myself so the real me can experience the real life available in Christ.

Clean Hands, Pure Heart

“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, emphasis mine).

If you want to have a pure heart, do something about the impurities. Don't have a mixed heart. Be sincere, with God and with other people, and he promises to purify and clean you.

In the Bible there is a special connection between clean hands and a pure heart. In Psalm 24:3–4 we read, “Who may ascend the mountain of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place? The one who has clean hands and a pure heart.”

Then we read, “Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts” (James 4:8).

In the Old Testament, washing your hands wasn't just something you did before dinner. It was a symbol of spiritual cleansing. When Solomon was building the temple to honor God, he had five washbasins placed on the south side of the temple and five on the north side. Before entering the temple, people would stop and wash their hands as a reminder that they were cleansing their spirits in preparation for worship. We want to come before God as ourselves, unmasked, with all impurities out of the way.

As you finish this chapter, I suggest something a little unusual. Go to a sink and take a moment to wash your hands. As you see the water trickle through your fingers, cleansing away the simple impurities, ask God to cleanse your heart, to show you where you can be more authentic. You can do a good job washing the outside, but nobody but God can cleanse the interior.

The Bible's promise to you is that as your heart becomes pure, you will receive the most incredible blessing: you will see God. The real you will know the real him. The relationship will not be based on performance and pretense but will be authentic. I can't think of a greater blessing than seeing God. To authentically know him and to be authentically known by him is what my soul was made for.

He will see you—just as you are, without the pretense, without the performance—and you will see him. Can you imagine a better offer than that?

Part 2

Where Strength Begins