

Spiritual Purity
By Rick Lowry

My friend Dave and I have a dream. Some year when we both have a month with nothing to do, we're going to spend four glorious weeks exploring every nook and cranny of Old U.S. Highway Sixty-Six, from Chicago to Los Angeles.

When it comes to Route Sixty-Six, Dave and I are purists. We will not make this trip in just any ol' car; it will be a black '51 Ford coupe. We will not eat at Mickey D's or other industrial strength fast-food places; Ted Drews' "66 Mix" and the ancient art deco diners will be our fare. We will not travel the four-lanes; whenever possible, we'll be finding the path the road *used* to take. When it comes to The Main Street of America, we are in search of the pure essence of the experience. *Sixty-Six Purity*, you might say.

There's another kind of purity that goes beyond reverence even for the Mother Road. It's worth a passionate investment of, not just one month, but a whole lifetime. It's spiritual purity. Like our dream trip, spiritual purity is also a journey, a road chosen with resolve by the serious follower of Jesus.

The Bible calls Christians, especially Christian leaders, to a life of spiritual purity. From the Psalms to Paul the word *pure* is repeated in Scripture. David prayed that God would create in him a *pure* heart (Psalm 51:10). In Philippians the standard is to be “*Pure* and blameless until the day of Christ” (Philippians 1:10*). Jesus and Paul both make it clear that outward appearances are inferior to true inward purity of the heart (Luke 11:39–41; I Timothy 1:5). Multiple Greek words are translated *pure*; in other places, they become *innocent, clean, or holy*.

Spiritual Purity is a life of holiness before God, inside and out. It is sincerity, honesty, and integrity. It is being what we appear to be, not faking anything. All of this is the natural result of a heart on frequency with God.

Not long ago I asked myself, “As a Christian leader, what kind of legacy do I want to leave; what do I want people to say about me when I’m gone?” I decided that one of the greatest compliments I could be granted would be for my gravestone to read, “A model of spiritual purity.” With that end in mind, I began to brainstorm the principles through which I want to filter my life in order to make it pure.

Spiritual Purity is Clear Spiritual Vision

Intimacy with God and spiritual purity are inseparably linked. Jesus, in his famous message on the mountain, reminded us that it is the pure in heart that will have the privilege of *seeing God*. Yet most of us confess a cloudy vision of that Glory.

Spiritual purity, or lack of it, might be compared to an aquarium. Our family has had several aquariums over the years, none very successful. I know it's possible to obtain that crystal clear, pure water look -- I've seen it in the tanks at the dentist's office. But our tanks always seem to be cursed with what I call "The London Look." The fish perpetually appear as though they are swimming around in a deep fog. When I possess the quality of spiritual purity, the spiritual cloudiness dissipates and I can see God clearly. When my life is pure, all the parts of my heart are open, vulnerable and clean before God and others.

But then something happens to stir mud into my vision. I don't notice it at first, that little shadowy part of my heart. In fact, I hardly feel it at all. Which makes permission easier for the next murky thing. And the next. It

doesn't hurt much. Before I know it, what once was pure has become cloudy, rancid and dark. Until I can't see God clearly.

Not many people start down a destructive path with a destructive end in mind. We start with just *one* intimate conversation with someone who's not our spouse, just one look at a pornographic website, just one seemingly insignificant dip into the petty cash fund. But one thing leads to the next, and soon the sin piles up too high -- to see God. If spiritual purity is the goal, I have to invite God to clear out the dust and trash, so that my eyes can focus only on Him. The cleanness of my heart determines how much of God I can see and how much of God can be seen in me.

Spiritual Purity is Sacrificing on the Right Altar

Ministers and ministries can be sacrificed on the altars of money, popularity and power. We want to be noticed. "If I could just do *that*, people would notice my (fill in the blank) "Job." "Talent." "Ministry." It's easy to feel like Asaph in Psalm 73:13. He looked around at the prosperity of the wicked and said, "Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure." The need to be affirmed can become greater than the need to be a living sacrifice, holy and blameless.

In moments of temptation to be noticed or accepted, Joshua is a model. Many of the other families in Israel had been sacrificing to foreign gods. The temptation to be popular must have been great. In that climate, Joshua stood up and said, “Even if no one else does, my house will serve the Lord.” (Joshua 24:15)

Success is not measured in numbers, but in faithfulness. Psalm 24 sets the standard: “Who may ascend to the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a *pure* heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol, or swear by what is false.”

Spiritual Purity Is Saturation with Scripture

My reading priorities can get mixed up at times. I can find the time to read the daily newspaper. I can faithfully read fiction novel after fiction novel. Why, then, do I have to work so hard at reading the most important Book ever published?

Distractions abound. It's easy to drift away from the simplicity of God's Word. In my busyness, holiness gives way to the nutritionless junk food of

life's activities. I can begin to analyze truth in secular terms, with the result that the simple, pure message is overlooked.

Peter calls Scripture the “*pure* spiritual milk,” and encourages us to *crave* it. (I Peter 2:2) The malaise of ideas opening fire on us every day are enough to confound even the strongest of Christians. Psalm 119:9 is a good reminder to keep coming home to: “How can a young man keep his way *pure*? By living according *your word*.”

Spiritual Purity Is a Witness

Philippians 2:15 issues the challenge to “become blameless and *pure*, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe.”

Spiritual purity does not benefit me alone -- it's also my witness. In a time of cultural decadence, a Christian commitment to morality is a refreshing commodity. It's like clean, cold water poured out onto spiritually dry land. Every day (when I'm paying attention) God grants me opportunities to show the world something different, and so impact the life of someone somewhere in a way that lets the healing begin.

When the people in my city think of the people in my congregation, what's the first thing that comes to their mind? Is it the marked difference in the purity of our lives? It starts with me as their leader.

Spiritual Purity in 2003 is Sexual Purity

Hebrews 13:4 says, "Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral."

Many in the world today would laugh at this verse and ridicule it as an outdated guideline. Casual attitudes about sex are everywhere, even in the church. But as Anatole France said, "Even if a million people believe a foolish thing, it is still a foolish thing." Pure is still what God wants the marriage bed to be -- even if a million people vote no.

Our Lord raised the bar even higher in Matthew 5:28: "I tell you that anyone who *looks* at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Jesus says that imagining, even if we don't touch, is still a sin. Sexual purity begins, not with the outside, but with the inner person.

Recent events in the Catholic Church are a wake-up call for all of us in Christian leadership. As a result of sexual impurity on the part of certain church leaders, many people are disheartened in their faith. Some have even given up on the church. Others have taken the poor example of their spiritual leaders as a cue to relax their own sexual standards. Maybe like me you've been thinking, "I'm glad it's not our church." But it could be -- unless we set our feet on firm spiritual ground in the middle of the incessant current of sexual pollution rushing around us.

In a city where I lived another church dismissed their senior minister because of immorality. As the scandal unfolded, it became known that this was the fourth church in which he had acted in this way. To add to the blight on Christ's Body, the man brazenly stayed in town, married the women he had impregnated and started another church. He eventually moved away, but his sins were responsible for years of painful scars on that church and the people it was trying to reach.

Sexual purity isn't the only aspect of the pure life in Scripture, but it is one with great potential to damage the ministry of the Body of Christ. That's

the bad news; the good news is that when we raise the bar on sexuality, we also have potential to influence our society for much good.

We live in a culture that is far too preoccupied with sex. We who are spiritual leaders are only kidding ourselves if think we are immune. Wisdom for me has been to acknowledge that I am vulnerable, in need of the support of God and spiritually strong people around me. Admitting the foolishness of standing alone is my only chance at remaining spiritually pure. Which leads to another principle about spiritual purity.

Spiritual Purity is Most Evident in Those Who Acknowledge They don't Possess It

Proverbs 20:9 says, “Who can say, ‘I have kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin?’” Do I think I have attained perfection in the area of spiritual purity? If so, I’m in a dangerous spiritual position. Proverbs 30:12 – “Those who are *pure* in their own eyes are not yet cleansed of their filth.” If I think I have arrived at spiritual purity, I’d better “take heed, lest I fall.”

I once attended a retreat of campus ministry leaders. I discovered something refreshing about the interaction between those present. Some

kind of unwritten law between campus ministers says, “You have permission to be yourself around us. It’s all right to have made mistakes. To have sinned. And even to have fewer students at Bible studies this year than last.” This quality provides campus ministers much greater potential to be spiritually pure. Their spiritual purity is not polluted by their pride.

Spiritual Purity is the Key to Genuine Love

In the end, purity, like so much of the Christian walk, comes down to love. The Bible suggests that only the spiritually pure can truly love. In I Timothy 1:5, Paul says that the goal of our Christian endeavors is “*love that comes from a pure heart.*” Has my heart brought me to a spiritual purity that is evident in complete openness and honesty with God and with others? Has it allowed me to be transparent -- because I have nothing to hide? When my heart is pure, I don’t have to pretend to be someone I’m not. The result is that I am free to really love others.

The first verse of an old hymn summarizes the essence of spiritual purity:

Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart.

Naught be all else to me save that Thou art.

Thou my best thought in the day and the night.

Waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light.

(*All Scripture quotations from the New International Version.)

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