



[Matthew 5:6](#)

(6) Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

King James Version

It is not at all uncommon these days to hear of an ambitious person as being "hungry" to accomplish significant things. Writers apply this term to athletes who want to make it to the professional leagues, to actors who want to attain stardom, and to businesspersons who seek to become CEO or president of a major corporation. These people drive themselves to work harder than their competition. They push themselves in studying every facet of their discipline, and they practice longer and harder than others. Their ambition knows no limits. They seem to play every angle to bring themselves to the attention of their superiors. They seize every opportunity to "sell" themselves to those who might be useful in promoting them.

Some but not all of these nuances are present in [Jesus'](#) use of "hunger" and "thirst" in [Matthew 5:6](#). He describes a person who from the very depths of his innermost being has a driving need to satisfy a desire. William Barclay, in his *Daily Study Bible* commentary on Matthew, provides a colorful description:

Words do not exist in isolation; they exist against a background of experience and thought; and the meaning of any word is conditioned by the background of the person who speaks it. That is particularly true of this beatitude. It would convey to those who heard it for the first time an impression quite different from the impression which it conveys to us.

The fact is that very few of us in modern conditions of life know what it is to be really hungry or really thirsty. In the ancient world it was very different. A working man's wage was the equivalent of three pence a day, and, even making every allowance for the difference in the purchasing power of money, no man ever got fat on that wage. A working man in Palestine ate meat only

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once a week, and in Palestine the working man and the day laborer were never very far from the border-line of real hunger and actual starvation.

It was still more so in the case of thirst. It was not possible for the vast majority of people to turn a tap and find the clear, cold water pouring into their house. A man might be on a journey, and in the midst of it the hot wind which brought the sand-storm might begin to blow. There was nothing for him to do but to wrap his head in his burnous and turn his back to the wind, and wait, while the swirling sand filled his nostrils and his throat until he was likely to suffocate, and until he was parched with an imperious thirst. In the conditions of modern western life there is no parallel at all to that. (vol. 1, p. 99)

We see, then, that Jesus is not using "hunger" or "thirst" as we would describe the emptiness or dryness we feel between meals, but a hunger or thirst that seemingly can never be satisfied. With physical appetite, this would be a hunger and thirst that, even after a full meal with plenty of drink, we would still feel as though we could eat and drink much more! Again, as Barclay describes it, "It is the hunger of the man who is starving for food, and the thirst of the man who will die unless he drinks" (pp. 99-100).

Nothing can better express the kind of desire we should have to obtain righteousness. The Bible's writers frequently employ the imagery of hunger and especially thirst to illustrate an ardent desire, particularly for the things of God:

- [Psalm 42:1-2](#): As the deer pants for the water brooks, so pants my soul for You, O [God](#). My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?
- [Psalm 63:1](#): O God, You are my God; early will I seek You; my soul thirsts for You; my flesh longs for You in a dry and thirsty land where there is no water.

Even limiting hunger and thirst to our normal, daily need for nourishment illustrates a continuous cycle of consuming a most vital necessity for spiritual life and strength.

— John W. Ritenbaugh

To learn more, see:

[The Beatitudes, Part Four: Hungering and Thirsting After Righteousness](#)

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