

The Beatitudes, Part Four: Hungering And Thirsting After Righteousness

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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 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.

Ending a Series of Links

In the introduction to this series, I mentioned that the Beatitudes seem to be linked in two general groups with the first four directed specifically toward one's relationship with God. Each link leads to the next while presupposing the one preceding it. If we are poor in spirit, we will humbly acknowledge our utter spiritual bankruptcy before God. We are thus led and enabled to mourn over the cause of our bankruptcy, our sins, as well as the ever-present corruption of human nature and its reign of sin and death in this world. Since we are sinners, when we are measured against the standard of God's holiness, and have nothing that will grant us preference over others, we must allow these two virtues to condition our behavior toward both God and men. We then make poverty of spirit, mourning and meekness part of the motivation to make up for deficiencies in our character God graciously exposes by revealing to us what we really are. If we are ever to be in His image, hungering and thirsting after righteousness must follow our confession of the sins God reveals.

Hungering and thirsting after righteousness is deeply involved in accomplishing important steps toward salvation. These steps are called a number of terms in God's Word, including justification, sanctification, growing, overcoming, becoming perfect, going on to perfection, coming to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, seeking holiness and being created in God's image. God enables us to have this desire and make use of it, but we must make the choices to sacrifice ourselves in accomplishing His desire for us. God's will for us now is that we prepare to live with Him just as He lives in His Kingdom.

What is Righteousness?

At first, the question "What is righteousness?" may seem like a "no-brainer" because we know it means "rectitude," or more simply, "right doing." By quoting Psalm 119:172, "All Your commandments are righteousness," we feel equipped with a direct biblical definition of this important biblical concept. None of these is wrong, but the Bible's use of "righteousness" is both specific and broad—so broad that in some places it is treated as a synonym of salvation itself:

Rain down, you heavens, from above, and let the skies pour down *righteousness*; let the earth open, let them bring forth *salvation*, and let righteousness spring up together. I, the Lord, have created it. (Isaiah 45:8)

This is an example of a typical Hebraic grammatical technique in which the two terms are used synonymously to reinforce and explain each other. The author thus makes his meaning clearer. Notice these other instances in Isaiah:

» Listen to Me, you stubborn-hearted, who are far from righteousness; I bring My *righteousness* near, it shall not be far off; My *salvation* shall not linger, and I will place salvation in Zion, for Israel My glory. (Isaiah 46:12-13)

» My *righteousness* is near, My *salvation* has gone forth, and My arms will judge the peoples. (Isaiah 51:5)

» Keep justice and do righteousness, for My *salvation* is about to come and My *righteousness* to be revealed. (Isaiah 56:1)

» I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for He has clothed me with the garments of *salvation*, He has covered me with the robe of *righteousness*. (Isaiah 61:10)

Though the Bible uses "righteousness" so broadly, its comparison with "salvation" does not help us much in understanding it because "salvation" is one of the Bible's most comprehensive terms. Since none of us has fully experienced salvation, we look through a glass darkly trying to comprehend it.

Righteousness is used in a similar sense in the very familiar passage given in Matthew 6:33, where Jesus commanded, "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you." Here it has the sense of seeking all of God's spiritual blessings, favor, image and rewards. We see in this verse not only a broad New Testament application of the term but also, more importantly, its priority to life. This dovetails perfectly with the hunger-and-thirst metaphor. It is not enough to ambitiously yearn to accomplish. According to Jesus, God's Kingdom and His righteousness are the very top priorities in all of life. Seeking God's righteousness is that important.

Obviously, the world does not have righteousness as its top priority. I hope that we do, and what we have has come to us completely unbidden as an act of God's grace. Jesus says it is our responsibility to seek after what God has made available to us. For what, exactly, are we to hunger and thirst? When God gives someone a responsibility, He also, by His grace, provides the means for him to accomplish it. Are we using the means He has given?

Three Righteousnesses

Some have argued that the righteousness Jesus refers to in Matthew 5:6 is what comes to all through Christ upon repentance. The Bible, though, shows three kinds of righteousness, and each is important in its own right. All three are included within the scope of Jesus' words because all three are

important to Christian life and development. All three are to be sought within each Christian's relationship with God and with fellow man. Two of them are exceedingly important, and the third less so only because of the Christian's God-limited authority in relation to this world.

The first is the righteousness of faith that comes when God justifies a sinner by grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. This results when Christ's obedience is imputed to him, thus giving him *legal* righteousness before God. David writes in Psalm 14:1, "There is none who does good, no, not one"; Paul changes the wording in Romans 3:10, "There is none righteous, no, not one."

God makes these powerful indictments against a world in which most people undoubtedly consider themselves as "good." But it is a goodness perceived through their own standards—in a mind not awakened to God's righteousness, filled with the pride of self-righteousness, deceived and blinded by the god of this world (Revelation 12:9; II Corinthians 4:3-4). Such a mind can be, like the unconverted Paul, an accomplice in killing and persecuting God's true children and think all the while it is righteously doing God service (John 16:2). They are like those described in Titus 1:16: "They profess to know God, but in works they deny Him, being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work."

According to God, all of us have been somewhere in this picture. As sinners we frequently broke God's law in word, thought and deed, and in many cases, were ignorant of doing so because of the deception and blindness Satan has wrought. But God in His calling removed the veil that was over our minds and revealed Himself, His purpose and His standards. We convicted ourselves of spiritual bankruptcy. Where we formerly thought of ourselves as perhaps involving ourselves in a "little" sin—but basically okay as measured against our neighbor and the evil people in society—we now begin to see ourselves in a far different light. We do not have a leg to stand on before God.

Romans 2:4 makes it clear that only by God's mercy are we led to see ourselves to some degree as He sees us: "Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?" God enables us to measure our goodness, our righteousness—which He describes as "like filthy rags" (Isaiah 64:6)—against Him rather than our neighbor. We realize that certain death for sin is staring us right in the face, yet He has graciously provided us with a perfect righteousness in Christ. This offer is not free, though, because we must totally surrender our lives to His rule. Even as it cost Jesus His life to provide this deliverance, it also costs us our lives, as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1), to take advantage of God's offer. Nonetheless, it is amazing how hungry and thirsty we become for God's offer of justification leading to salvation.

However, we cannot stop here. Hunger and thirst have brought us this far, but it is only a beginning. If it is a true, godly hunger and thirst, it remains, even though we are justified, because the justified person realizes God has only begun a good work in us (Philippians 1:6). The hungry person will recall Romans 5:1-2:

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

Justification brings reconciliation and therefore peace with God and access to Him. But it also brings with it the hungering and thirsting for the very glory of God! What an awesome thing to consider that, once we have an imputed righteousness, having God's very image created in us, imparted to us by His Spirit, is the goal of the process we began through God's calling. It can be ours!

It is a profound but nonetheless true purpose that everyone who catches this vision must surely desire with all his being! Have we ever been offered anything greater? Can any other goal in life even begin to compare? We must not "neglect so great a salvation" (Hebrews 2:3)! We must not let this great potential slip from our grasp! No wonder Jesus used such strong language to describe the driving desire for God's righteousness that pleases Him. And when He sees it in us, He will also satisfy it.

Striving for the Second Righteousness

The second kind of righteousness for which we are to hunger and thirst is the one that occupies the greater portion of our life after conversion. Notice how Jesus states this beatitude. He does not say, "Blessed are those who have hungered . . .," but rather, "Blessed are those who hunger [*do hunger*, KJV]." This hungering and thirsting is a continuous state, and it must be this way for the second kind of righteousness, elsewhere called pursuing holiness, going on to perfection, or growing in the grace and the knowledge of Jesus Christ. Frequently the Bible calls it sanctification. None of these terms is specifically righteousness, but all are contained within its broad meaning. This righteousness is created in us, imparted to us by God's Holy Spirit following justification as we experience our relationship with God. It is seeking godly character to be prepared for living in His Kingdom.

God cannot create His holy and righteous character by fiat. It requires the willing and freely given cooperation of the called; by exercising their free moral agency, they submit to Him in the experiences of life. Submission is difficult, and thus Christianity is no cake-walk through a garden. Jesus often warns that it will require a devotion to Him of such degree that all else must be secondary to Him. We are to bear our crosses and count the cost (Luke 14:26-28). He also warns, "The way is difficult and narrow" (Matthew 7:14), and "He who endures to the end shall be saved" (Matthew 24:13). The trek of the ancient Israelites through the wilderness is a type of the Christian's pilgrimage to the Kingdom of God. Their wilderness experiences expose a number of pitfalls that can destroy a Christian's faith and enthusiasm for continuing to the end.

Through this beatitude, God presents us with a serious challenge. Because it is continuously needed, it establishes a demanding requirement. How much do we want goodness, the righteousness of God? Do we want it as much as a starving man desires food or a parched man wants water? Do we so lack vision that we will give up our faith as all the Israelites, save Joshua and Caleb, did in the wilderness? According to Hebrews 4:1, though they heard the good news, they did not believe it sufficiently. They, therefore, died in the wilderness, their pilgrimage finished before they reached their goal. Rather than submit, they resisted God until their deaths. Apparently, they did not hunger for it.

Most of us have a desire for God's Kingdom and His righteousness, but it is, to our detriment, frequently nebulous rather than sharp. When the time comes to make a choice, we are not prepared to make the required effort or sacrifice that the righteousness of God demands. It is situations like these that reveal that we do not desire righteousness more than anything else.

Why do we do things like this even when we desire righteousness? It is very easy to answer that the problem lies with human nature, and this is not wrong, just quite broad. Jesus gives an answer along this line in Matthew 15:18-20:

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.

The heart symbolizes our innermost being, the source of our words and actions. Today we call it the mind. When God awakens us to some of His great truths, when we at last begin to realize the vital importance of righteousness, there is a blush of first love, and we begin to hunger to apply them in our lives. But what is already in the heart fights almost desperately not to be displaced by the new nature in hope of wearing down our enthusiasm for the truth. Paul illustrates this resistance 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 do not do the things that you wish.

Why do we not do the things we wish? The answer lies in the extraordinary power of ingrained habits. They are most difficult to break because they have had free sway for so long one unconsciously does what they incite. Paul speaks of this using a different metaphor in Romans 7:23: "But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members."

The almost constant persistence of these habits can be depressing. If we seem to be making no progress, life can become downright discouraging. But we must not give in to discouragement. We have everything to gain and nothing to lose except that which is of no value for the Kingdom of God anyway. Discouragement that feeds frustration only makes Satan's work that much easier for him.

There are things we can do to enhance the initial hunger God gives to us. If we were physically hungry or thirsty, we would give every last ounce of strength we had to find food and water or die in the effort. We must be willing to do whatever it takes to make progress in our quest for God's righteousness.

As adolescents, we were unaware that growth was taking place until someone who had not seen us for a while brought it to our attention. Even though we were not aware we were growing, we still made efforts to grow by eating and drinking the things that promote growth. In the same way spiritual growth may also seem so slow that we think it is not happening. But we should not let that stop us! We must keep on making the spiritual efforts even as we did the physical, and growth will occur. Keep on praying for others, thanking God for His goodness and mercy, asking for wisdom, love and faith. Keep studying God's Word, filling the mind with

Whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things. (Philippians 4:8)

Paul writes in II Timothy 3:1, "In the last days perilous times will come." For us, a great deal of that peril exists in the multitude of visible, emotional and audible distractions that occupy minds nurtured by television, movies and radio. Through these mediums we invite the world and much of its appeal

directly into our homes. We have come to tolerate television's intrusion into our lives. By means of the Internet, some of us have become information junkies, and others can hardly go anywhere without being accompanied by a playing radio. We need to honestly examine ourselves as to whether we are showing God that what this world bombards our minds with through these mediums is really what we hunger and thirst for. How are they preparing us for the Kingdom of God?

God is the Source of what makes us grow spiritually, so we must strive to keep the relationship with Him vibrantly alive through constant communication and striving to obey. We must fill our minds with His character and His wonderful purpose, counterbalancing these with knowing what this world is really like and what horrific situations those who have no knowledge of Him or His purpose experience. These things will help to put an "edge" on our hunger, helping to keep it alive and sharp.

We must ask God to fill our minds with insight into the glorious way He lives life—free of fear and pain, unworried about murder or harm, always creating and involved in wonderful projects that bring good to others, warmly satisfied in accomplishing good. Do we not desire to live life forever like this too?

Social Righteousness

Because of the nature of Christianity today, the third kind of biblical righteousness does not touch as much on our lives. At the same time, we must not allow ourselves to think it is of little importance. Biblical righteousness is more than a private and personal affair, something only having to do with our direct personal relationship with God. This kind of righteousness can be called a social righteousness. It is hungering and thirsting for righteousness for the community as well as for the self. It can involve civil rights, justice in the courts, integrity in business, and honor in home and family. It is much more evident in the Old Testament, when the covenant people lived in a single community, Israel, as a kingdom of this world. At the very least, this righteousness contemplates, "Let your light so shine before men, that they see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16).

Today, "our citizenship is in heaven" (Philippians 3:20). Peter describes us as "sojourners and pilgrims," showing Christians as being aliens in a land not theirs, just passing through, as it were, to another place (I Peter 2:11). Paul calls us "ambassadors for Christ" (II Corinthians 5:20). Therefore, in many aspects of the exercise of citizenship normally required in a country of residence, our priority goes to the Kingdom of God.

Jesus is a clear example of what we must seek to do. Despite all of His wonderful powers, He never moved to change society externally. Though exceedingly wiser than the entrenched government, He in no way attempted to overthrow it or get a crowd behind Him to vote it out of existence. He did not participate in its politics, nor did He sit in councils or juries judging cases that normally come to those bodies. The apostle Paul followed His example. There is no record of any of the apostles concerning themselves with these things, even though they were undoubtedly disgusted with the outrageous injustices perpetrated and sympathetic toward the victims. Indeed, like Jesus, they all may have been victims of human government. They, like us, undoubtedly yearned with great desire for the time to come when they could change things according to God's way.

We should have this desire to change things, and thus we pray virtually every day, "Thy kingdom come." But this should not stop us from doing good as we have opportunity. Jesus did move to change society internally by laying the groundwork through the preaching of the gospel of the

Kingdom of God and dying for the sins of mankind. He used His office as God's apostle by traveling around the nation doing good through healing, counseling and teaching. He did not do more because it was not yet God's time for it. Similarly, though we do not have the office of God's apostle, we nonetheless have His authority to do good works within the framework of our part of His body.

Thus Paul writes in Galatians 6:9-10:

And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.

It is noteworthy that Paul includes some incentive to gain more willing participation in seeking this righteousness. We are not to give in to weariness but to know that we will reap reward. That is God's promise. If, like a farmer, we want a harvest, we must also sow.

Cotton Mather, a Puritan preacher, once said, "The opportunity to do good imposes the obligation to do it." He is implying that we have been favored when an opportunity to serve in this manner arises. We are not to do it only when it is convenient or when it will contribute to our fame, but we should do it when we have opportunity, no matter how often it occurs or how much self-denial it takes. Proverbs 3:27-28 adds the Bible's approval of this maxim:

Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in the power of your hand to do so. Do not say to your neighbor, "Go, and come back, and tomorrow I will give it," when you have it with you.

We should be thankful for the privilege of representing our Savior in this manner. If we are not, we might need to ask ourselves, "Just how hungry am I to carry out this search for righteousness?"

Filled

Like all the other beatitudes, this one also has a promise. Remember, this is a God-created hunger that begins when He calls us into His Family. When God creates a hunger and thirst in us, it is so that He may fill it. When God creates a need in us to know Him, to understand His will and be like Him, it is for the express purpose of drawing us to Him to embrace all these things as part of ourselves.

Like hungering and thirsting, there is first an initial and then a continuous filling. He fills us with what He is and what we need to negotiate our pilgrimage to His Kingdom safely and securely. He fills us with understanding that we might have His perspective on the affairs of this life and a clear vision of our future life in His Kingdom. He fills us with wisdom that we might apply the understanding He makes available to us. He fills us with a peace that passes all understanding in the midst of an insane world. He fills us with thanksgiving and knowledge of Him that we might praise Him. He fills us with faith, hope and love that we might be like Him (I John 3:2).

He does all this and much more that we might be done with sin forever. Then, according to Revelation 7:16-17,

They shall neither hunger anymore nor thirst anymore; . . . for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of waters.