

Blessed Are the Spiritually Hungry
Psalm 42 and Matthew 5:6
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In the first three Beatitudes we have witnessed a natural progression of what takes place in a heart that has been awakened by God. First, there is a realization of our spiritual poverty. We are made aware of our absolute nothingness and emptiness before God. With that realization comes a deep sorrow over the depth of our depravity and our lost condition. We mourn over the impact of our sin on God, ourselves and others. That grief then drastically changes how we live before our fellow human beings. It puts an end to our attempts to justify and defend ourselves. We are forced to abandon all pretense of personal merit, of what we are “owed,” of any rights we think are ours to claim. We live in humble meekness before all others, not because they are deserving or not deserving—but because we know who we are before God. This morning we come to the fourth Beatitude: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.”

I can't help but wonder if one of the reasons the Beatitudes are so enduring is that they address one of the most fundamental questions that human beings ask. What does it mean to be happy? Everybody wants to be happy. That is, perhaps, THE great motive behind every act and ambition, behind all our work and striving and effort. With everything we've got, we want and pursue a good and happy life.

But the great tragedy of life is that, though we give ourselves wholeheartedly to this pursuit, happiness eludes us. We never seem to be able to grasp it. And even when we think we've laid hold of it, it turns out to be fleeting. We are happy for a moment, but then it is gone. The perfect job turns out to be not so perfect. That wonderful new relationship turns out to have problems just like all our other relationships do. That mountaintop experience with God? It turns out we can't live on the mountaintop, and that deserts are still part of our lives. The thrill of the latest purchase or trip or event—that thrill never lasts for long.

Scripture names the source of our frustration and futility in the fourth Beatitude. Pay careful attention to what this Beatitude says and what it does not say. We are not to hunger and thirst after blessedness itself; we are not to pursue happiness because it turns out that happiness is not something that can be sought directly. It is always what results from seeking something else, and that something

else, according to Jesus is righteousness. When you get it backwards, and make happiness your goal rather than righteousness, you will be doomed to misery which explains an awful lot about why there is such widespread dissatisfaction and despair in a country as well-off as ours.

This is a fundamental error into which the world has fallen. We do exactly the opposite of what Jesus prescribes. Think of this way. A patient is suffering from a painful disease. His one objective is to get relief, and understandably so. No one likes to suffer and he is willing to do anything to get rid of the pain. So, he goes to the doctor, but if his doctor is only concerned with relieving pain, she is a very bad practitioner. The doctor's primary duty is to discover the cause of the pain and to treat that, and to not do so could be extremely dangerous to the patient. He could be out of pain and appear to be well, but the underlying disease is still there running rampant.

That is the temptation of modern life. People are in a tremendous amount of pain, but rather than discover the root cause and treat the disease itself, we mask our pain with entertainment, sports, shopping, drugs, overwork, technology, or busyness. And, it happens inside the church as well. There are "religious junkies" who go from meeting to meeting, convention to convention hoping to have this wonderful experience that will fill them with joy and flood them with ecstasy. But, we are not meant to hunger and thirst after experiences. If we want to be truly happy and blessed, we must hunger and thirst after righteousness.

So, what is this righteousness? Let me start by saying what it's not. The righteousness that Jesus is urging us to pursue is not merely a general respectability or a general morality. It's not being "good" in some vague, esoteric sort of way. It doesn't even go far enough to define it using a theological term like justification. We may know God is love and that God loves us, but that in and of itself does not mean we are righteous. No, the best starting point is understanding righteousness as meaning a *desire to be right with God*. And, being right with God means we have a desire to be free from sin because sin separates us from God, and so, quite naturally, the righteous person wants to get rid of all that keeps her from knowing God and walking in close fellowship with God.

But, there are two further nuances to this desire to be right with God. Not only do we want to be free of sin, we want to be free from the power of sin. For the righteous, we acknowledge the war that goes on within our hearts and minds—that even when we want to do the right thing, there is a tug-or-war, a power that pulls us to do the very things we don't want to do, to react in exactly the way we

vowed not to, to say those thoughtless or unkind or cutting remarks instead of holding our tongues. We know what it is to feel bound by the tyranny of attitudes and wrong thinking that bedevil us and cause us to act in ways we don't want to, but somehow can't seem to stop ourselves. As we pursue righteousness, we want to get rid of the hold sin has on us.

But, it goes still one step further. Righteousness means desiring to be free from the very *desire* to sin, because when we truly examine ourselves and discover our bondage to sin, there is an even greater horror and that is the fact that we like it, that we want it. We know our self-centeredness is sinful and hurts our relationships, but we still want what we want when we want it. But for the one who pursues righteousness, he longs for deliverance from what we might call the pollution of sin. Sin is something that pollutes the very essence of our being and nature. The Christian is one who desires to be free from all that.

Perhaps we can sum it all up like this: to hunger and thirst after righteousness is to desire to be free from self in all its awful manifestations, to be emancipated from self-concern in every shape and form—free from pride, envy, boasting, self-protection, sensitiveness, the need to defend, prove or glorify self. It is, in short, the longing to be holy, a holiness that displays the fruit of the Spirit in every action and in the whole of life. It means one's supreme desire is to know God and to walk in the light with God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In the final analysis, hungering and thirsting after righteousness is the longing to be transformed into the likeness and image of Jesus himself.

It is quite deliberate that Jesus uses the words “hunger and thirst” to describe this pursuit of righteousness. Think about what hunger and thirst feel like physically. Hunger is something deep and profound that goes on and on until it is satisfied. It hurts; it is painful. It doesn't let up or subside if we ignore it. Instead, a faint twinge of hunger turns into a gnawing, which turns into a rumbling, which turns into a roar of pain until we put something in our stomachs. Hunger makes people desperate, willing to beg, steal, even murder in order to alleviate their suffering.

That is the picture of what our desire for God is to be like. It is a passion, a craving that eats up all the lesser hungers in our lives, until there is nothing we want more than to walk in holy communion with God. In the words of Charles Spurgeon, it is to have a “ravenous appetite” for Christ...to be greedy and covet after everything that is right and good and pure and lovely and of good repute.

Like the previous Beatitudes, this fourth one describes a dual experience with both an initial and a continuous aspect to it, and that is true for the promised blessing as well. No one ever gets permanently “filled.” We desire food, we eat it and we are filled for a little while, but soon enough we are hungry again. We desire drink and we have it, but soon we are thirsty again. But the person who hungers and thirsts for righteousness will be so “filled” that he will never again hunger or thirst as he did before.

God creates in our souls a hunger and thirst that only God can satisfy. And, of course, when God sets out to fill us, it is an abundant, extravagant response to our need. The Greek word used here for “filled” might be better translated, “they shall lie satiated.” In other words, they will have all they need, enough and to spare. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled to the brim. But, before we can receive this blessing, we must feel our spiritual poverty so that recognizing our need for Christ, we will be drawn into God’s loving embrace.

Like the prodigal who finally recognized his emptiness as he lay face down in the pig sty, when we come to our senses, we return to find our Father racing down the lane, arms flung open wide to welcome us home. The fatted calf is prepared and we are filled: filled with the peace of God which passes all understanding. Filled with the joy of belonging that no suffering can take away. Filled with praise and thanksgiving for the One who has worked in us and changed us to make us his own. Filled with all the riches of the kingdom which the world can neither give nor take away. Filled by the goodness and mercy of the Lord till our cups run over.

And even with all that, what we enjoy today is but a small foretaste of what God has prepared for those who love him. In the day when God’s kingdom comes fully and finally, when Christ returns to unite heaven and earth, all things—including us—will be made new. Then we will be finished with sin forever. Then there will be no more pain or suffering. Then we shall hunger and thirst no more, for we will be filled for all eternity.

While we wait for that day, today we know that if we are hungering and thirsting for righteousness, we are on the winning side. The battle may go against us just now. But the Lord still lives and as the Lord lives, righteousness will triumph and all that is false will be trampled underfoot. Do you want to be there in the day when the Prince of Truth and Righteousness takes his place in his kingdom? Do you want to be there when the heavens split with the jubilant shout, “The King of Kings and the Lord of Lords” has conquered all his foes and defeated

death? Do you want to be there when the Lamb alone is found worthy to judge the nations? If you want to be there then, then be here now—here where the fight rages, here where Christ has called us to stand together as his church, ravenously desiring God’s righteousness as we, in humble repentance, serve with joy the world he came to save.

No, we are not there yet. But pay attention: Christ pronounces blessing not on those who are full of righteousness but on those who hunger and thirst after it. Those who see their depravity, who mourn over their emptiness, who grieve over the pollution and power of sin in their lives, and who yearn, who crave to be remade in the holy likeness of Christ—these are the ones who are blessed and who have a place in God’s kingdom, both now and forevermore. Amen.