

## ***The Blessed: Hungering and Thirsting for Righteousness***

**Matthew 5:6**

Readings: Matthew 5:6, John 6:35, Matthew 5:43-48

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Beatitudes Series #4

Dear fellow followers of Jesus,

Have you ever been super hungry or thirsty? We say things like “I’m starving!” when we really aren’t. We’re just feeling a little grumbly in the tummy. We had breakfast and lunch and now it’s 4pm and we’re feeling like a snack. In our part of the world, very few people really know what it is to be starving. Likewise, when we say, “I’m so thirsty”, we are probably just longing for another can of pop or a cup of coffee but we’ve already had one or two today. We want another glass of water but had 7 cups so far today.

### **Intensity**

The words in today’s beatitude that speak of hungering and thirsting are intense. They speak to desperation. They refer to those who realize that we need righteousness but can’t get it. We can’t attain it on our own. It’s out of reach for us. But we still desperately desire it like a starving or parched person craves food and drink.

In Jesus’ words the intensity is high. As one author put it, “To hunger meant feeling the Grim Reaper’s scythe (or knife) pierce your stomach, and to thirst meant feeling his hand clutch your throat. To the person who really hungers and thirsts, nothing else matters; all other desires become insignificant. Blessed is the person who longs for righteousness as though his or her life depends on it.” (DW McCullough, *Finding Happiness...* p.79).

In Edmonton, we have food and drink at our fingertips in our homes or just minutes away in stores and restaurants. But think of hungering and thirsting in the context where Jesus said those words.

The disciples understood the seriousness of access to food and drink in their day. People had to work hard to get their food. Women mostly had to grind wheat by hand; they would walk long distances often to get water from the local wells. It was hard work to ensure the family had enough to eat and drink. Men also worked hard in the fields or at their trade to provide the basics for their families. Hungry and thirsty people work diligently to ensure their physical needs are met. They can’t slack off. They remain intent—intense—about providing.

Think about the times Jesus fed the multitudes. People followed him and came to him from miles around. However, physical food was not readily available for them. They couldn’t hit the 7-Eleven on the corner or one of ten local drive-thrus. So when these spiritually hungry people had followed Jesus all day, he had compassion on them and told the disciples to feed them. The disciples quite understandably said, “We can’t feed all these people. Send them away.” They knew food wasn’t that easy to come by. That was true. But Jesus said, “No! I’ll feed them.” And he did so

miraculously and abundantly. He met the spiritual hunger and thirst of the crowds but also ensured that their physical needs were met before they went home.

When food is scarce, our intensity for it goes up. Way up. The thought of starving to death is frightening. When Covid first hit, remember how many people hoarded food and were even obsessed with having enough toilet paper? That seems silly now. But fear and desperation can make us do weird things. Fear can heighten our intensity.

I'm sure most of us have seen video footage out of Afghanistan over the last week. The intense hunger for freedom shines through in the images of those who run alongside of a big Hercules jet, longing for an escape from a country ruled by the brutal Taliban. Some people clung to the outside of the jet as it took off, only to fall to their death. These people desperately want to get out. Desperately want to get away from the Taliban. I'm not sure I've seen anything in recent memory that represents intensity like that. There's this sense that I'm damned if I stay in this country so I'll do anything to get out. Anything! Even risk my life. If I stay here, I'm pretty sure I'll be dead so I might as well risk my life trying to escape.

Jesus wants us to get a sense of our intense need and he says we're blessed because it can be met through his grace. So hear the intensity of Jesus' words about hungering and thirsting for righteousness.

Do we seek this righteousness like our life depends on it? Apparently as the famous author Rudyard Kipling was sick and dying, his nurse asked him if he wanted anything; he answered, "I want God!" That speaks to our greatest need.

We live in a society where people spend a lot of our life looking for fulfillment in things of this world. But do we pursue what we really need with desperation or intensity? We chase after the bigger and better with intensity—maybe the faster car, better computer, latest cell phone, better job, more Facebook friends, more likes on what we post, and more followers on Instagram. Perhaps we've hungered and thirsted for things that don't last and can't really satisfy.

Jesus, however, says, blessed are you when you hunger and thirst for the most important thing—our relationship with God and relationship with others that flows from it. This is righteousness. Now let's consider how it affects us and our relationships.

## **Righteousness in Relationship to God through Christ**

Jesus says we are blessed when we hunger and thirst for righteousness. He wants us to know that he's the source of all we need and then he invites us to seek it from him. Yes, blessed are those who hunger and thirst *for righteousness*. It will be filled by him!

In brief, righteousness is about being in right relationships. Hungering and thirsting for righteous means longing for the world to be as it should be. It's like

*shalom* in the OT—everything as it ought to be. People in right relationship with God, with each other and with the world.

Hungering and thirsting for righteousness means, first of all, longing to get in a right relationship with God. That comes from recognizing our sin. Sin creates separation between us and God. Sin has broken our relationship. We can't fix that on our own but the people to whom Jesus speaks have been taught that we need to fix it on our own. We need to become righteous. Now they are hearing the radical gospel. Indeed, Jesus offers us this righteousness in himself when he says in John 6:35,  
*Jn 6:35 Whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.*

We can put our faith in Jesus who is the perfect righteousness of God and be saved. Paul writes to the Corinthian Church,  
*2 Cor 5:21 God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

God provides righteousness—gifts it to us freely and lavishly. Jesus pays the price for our sin to restore us to a right relationship with God. He alone satisfies our spiritual hunger and thirst.

When Martin Luther discovered this amazing truth, he said, from that moment on I thought of Paul's words as 'the gate to Paradise itself.' Luther had hungered and thirsted for righteousness, and God satisfied him! What a blessing that is!

### **Righteousness in Relationship to Self**

As those who receive the righteousness of God by faith, Jesus wants us to understand that our new and improved relationship with God changes us. We receive forgiveness but then we also hunger and thirst for a righteous life. The work of Jesus in restoring us to God changes our relationship to ourselves.

Dr. Daniel Doriani of Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis writes about this, "To hunger for righteousness is to yearn for God's rule in our lives." Listen to that again: ***To hunger for righteousness is to yearn for God's rule in our lives.*** Jesus talks about how disciples seek first the kingdom of God (Mt. 6:33). This means we want what God wants for our lives. We rest, first of all, in Jesus' work of making us righteous in God's eyes. That's what we call justification. However, that gift includes the power of the Holy Spirit who helps us to increasingly live into the righteousness God has in mind for his children. The Holy Spirit empowers us to uproot our sin and become more like Jesus. This is sanctification.

That means as a disciple of Jesus, I long to live a righteous life. I'm saved by grace—made righteous in the eyes of God by Jesus. That, however, creates in me an additional hunger and thirst to let my life exude righteousness—to shine, to overflow, to influence the world with the righteousness that Jesus is growing in me. Because I love Jesus, I love what he loves and hunger and thirst for that.

The Apostle Paul speaks of this in several places but think about what he says to us in Romans 6:13, for example. As disciples of Jesus, he reminds us,

*Rom 6:13 Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness.*

The work of Jesus changes how we view ourselves. We're no longer slaves to sin. We are righteous and can now offer our lives as instruments of righteousness. And that's something we intensely desire because the Holy Spirit stirs that up in us. We should pray for that desire to grow in us. And we can rejoice that even in the Lord's Supper, we are strengthened with grace from God to feed and empower our hunger and thirst for this righteousness.

## **Righteousness in Relationship to Others**

Next, we discover that the change in ourselves changes our relationship with others too. Because Christ has made me righteous and is helping me live into that righteousness more and more, I also hunger and thirst for good relationships with other people. That's also something his grace enables me to do. This is Jesus' point in the part of Matthew 5 I read about loving our neighbours and even our enemies. The grace of Jesus helps us to genuinely love people, even people who are thought to be unlovable or unworthy of our love. Loving our friends is one thing. Everyone does that. But loving enemies can only be done with supernatural grace. Yes, God's grace empowers to pursue righteousness in relationships!

Paul reminds the church in Corinth of this when he talks about their broken relationships. Maybe you know that the Corinthian church was divided along various lines. In 1 Corinthians 3, Paul speaks to their division over leadership. In doing so, he points to unrighteousness in their relationships, using words like worldly. He also speaks of the church being childish. Listen.

*1 Cor 3:1 Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly—mere infants in Christ. <sup>2</sup> I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. <sup>3</sup> You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans? <sup>4</sup> For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere human beings?*

Paul is saying that righteous Christians seek the good of others. If we know we've been made righteous by Christ and are seeking to live out that righteousness in their daily lives, it should show in how we treat others. That should start within the church and then spread to all around us, all our neighbours and even our enemies.

Maybe start small if this sounds intimidating. Sometimes it's as simple as saying hello to a lonely person walking down the street or living next door. Sometimes it's inviting a quiet person to have a coffee with you. Keep your eyes open to needs around you.

I saw a short little video that made me realize again how easy it can be to do something for others that doesn't take a lot of effort but makes a big difference. I watched a blind lady in a restaurant on her birthday. The chef was told about her. So

he went the extra mile to help a blind woman enjoy her birthday cake by writing *Happy Birthday* on her cake in braille. It made a huge impact on this woman! He would have had to do some quick research, I'm sure. But he made it happen. Loving our neighbours doesn't have to be extravagant, just something you are able to do and willing to do because the Spirit has put it on your heart.

In short, we live out the righteousness of the Lord in us by showing love to others. It can be as simple as an encouraging word. And it can be tougher, like it was for the Corinthian Church. To them, Paul urged seeking unity and working together with one another, setting aside differences to better show the love of Christ. Forgiving as we've been forgiven. That can be very hard but the Spirit helps us do the impossible. Jealousy and quarreling caused division in Corinth and still do today. We can do better as God's Spirit-empowered people.

Perhaps you heard the story of Corrie TenBoom who was greeted by a German soldier. It was a few years after World War 2. She was speaking about God's deliverance but afterward she was greeted by a former Nazi who was responsible for the death of her sister in the concentration camp. She tells how she recognized him. He wanted to ask for her forgiveness. At first, she couldn't do it but as the Spirit empowered her, she lifted her hand toward his and the healing balm of Jesus did the rest.

The bottom line is that we must learn to listen to the Holy Spirit as he leads us to act in love to others—friends, church members, neighbours, strangers and even enemies. The grace of God to help us in this is amazing. Our hunger and thirst for righteousness impacts our relationship with others and brings blessing.

### **Righteousness in Relationship to Society**

Finally, this morning, we can consider how our hunger and thirst for righteousness impacts our society. When we look at how Jesus looked at the brokenness of his world and when we look at how the Old Testament repeatedly calls God's people to pursue justice in their world, it's obvious that disciples of Jesus have an intense desire for social righteousness. Just as we desire for God's rule to touch us personally and affect other relationships with people, so we desire for God's righteous rule to impact all areas of society. This is a hallmark of the Reformed expression of Christianity. All of life falls under the redeeming scope of Jesus. That includes healthcare, business, education, politics, poverty & housing, justice, the environment, sexuality and much more. Everything.

For example, we find ourselves right now in the midst of a federal election campaign and a city election. This is a time to be especially attuned to what our candidates are saying, what their party platform says and what their record indicates. There are no perfect political parties or politicians in our world. We probably all can point a finger at our current city, provincial and federal government leaders and find plenty of fault. However, we must make a decision that we seek to make with the insight of the Bible and guidance of the Holy Spirit if was long for righteousness in our society.

Some political platforms will be better at giving us room to live out our faith and beliefs. Meanwhile, others will want us to conform to their unrighteous beliefs, even though they believe their values are pure and good. But in reality they are not open to God's values for society. Our job as Christians in a time like this is to ask questions and seek to understand who is a friend to God's righteous rule in our society and who isn't. On some issues, it may be one party and it may be a different party on another issue. We must weigh out these options and then vote. I'd love to have more conversation about this so feel free to reach out if you wish to do so.

During my study leave, I spent a little time reflecting on some of the things our church has done that I believe put a smile on God's face. One of those righteous acts, I think, is our embrace of the work of the Mosaic Centre. For over 10 years now, this organization has been helping the downtrodden in our community. The effects are often small and slow but bit by bit the kingdom of God touches the brokenness of our society with the love and hope of Jesus.

Beyond that there are smaller things we've been doing like Christmas Hampers and the Back-to-School backpacks. We've had youth go downtown to work with the Mustard Seed. We give to Resonate and World Renew in their efforts to transform society elsewhere. Right now places like Haiti and Afghanistan need our attention. We shouldn't be able to look at those places without having some sort of hunger and thirst for righteousness there. The list of ways that we can seek righteousness in our society and world is probably endless.

But here's the question to end with. Do you hunger and thirst for righteousness? Do you long for it personally? Do you work at in your relationship with others? In society? Or, as one writer put it, "**are you satisfied with a nibble of righteousness**—a few moments of justice and love? Do you have a passionless routine, a dull, dutiful life, where you fit in and drift along, with the years passing like a lazy summer day? Real disciples yearn for God's righteousness and pursue it."

The point is that pursuing righteousness may not be popular or easy. But when you do what God wants, that is truly the best way to live, the most rewarding and fulfilling. Your hunger and thirst will most definitely be filled. You will be blessed.

As we do so, always remember that the one who satisfies our hunger and thirst for righteousness is Jesus. By his grace, we are made righteous, by his Spirit's prompting we seek more of the righteous life. And with the Holy Spirit's power—the power that raised Jesus from the dead—we are enabled to pursue righteousness in all our relationships and society at large.

We are indeed blessed.