

Hunger & Thirst

Matthew 5:6

By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)

We continue this morning with our series on the Sermon on the Mount, which begins with the Beatitudes. Our text, from Matthew 5, is: Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied/filled. It is important to see that Jesus expected his disciples to exhibit the character of ALL the beatitudes, and not just some of them, not just the ones that may seem more doable or manageable to us. They all hang together, and they all reflect the blessed life, the flourishing life of the citizens of the heaven. To have one of the virtues, the states of blessedness, entails having all the others.

To put this a different way, we might say there is a kind of order in the first four beatitudes. Poverty of spirit leads to mourning for sin, this mourning leads to a meekness before God and men, but these dispositions should, and must, lead to a more vigorous pursuit of the righteousness of the kingdom. This beatitude is more aggressive, if you will, for here we make the transition from mourning over the past, or perhaps a present situation, to hungering for a future righteousness. So, we will look at this text under three headings: Righteousness, Hunger and Thirst, and Being satisfied.

I. Righteousness

First, then, righteousness. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Here I will make two sub-points. Personal Righteousness, and Social Righteousness.

Person Righteousness

First, then, personal righteousness. The righteousness in view here is NOT the legal, imputed righteousness, which is ours by faith alone in Christ. In other words, Jesus is not talking about the righteousness by which we are justified.

There are two reasons why this must be so. First, upon our conversions, we are made righteous, justified by faith. And we possess that legal righteousness before God fully and forever. There is, then, no need to perpetually hunger and thirst for it. (and Jesus is talking to those who are already disciples here).

Second, in a later beatitude, just a few verses after our text, Jesus says: blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. Clearly it is lived out righteousness, righteous living, not legal righteousness, that the saints are persecuted for.

The whole Sermon on the Mount, in which the word "righteousness" occurs seven times, and an examination of those usages makes it clear that Jesus is talking about righteous character. Righteousness imparted and wrought out in our lives. Righteousness made visible in the world. We are to seek his kingdom and its RIGHTEOUSNESS. And that means we must hunger and thirst for increasing personal righteousness, for conformity to the image of God in Jesus Christ.

For this is the very goal of our salvation – conformity to the image of the transfigured and glorified Christ. Whom he foreknew, he predestined – predestined to what? – predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son. This personal, subjective righteousness, a righteousness which seeks freedom from sin in all its forms – this living sanctity is what is in view in the text. Like Jesus, our FOOD is to be the doing of the will of God.

Social Righteousness

The second sub-point here is social righteousness. Hungering and thirsting for righteousness also has a public, social, political, even international dimension. To desire God's kingdom and its righteousness, is to long for the full revelation of God's royal reign to be manifest in the earth.

It means we desire justice; we desire the deliverance of the oppressed, the vindication of the martyrs, the protection of widows and orphans, the end of violence and bloodshed. It means we cry out with Amos: Let justice roll down like the rivers, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. We are not hungering and thirsting for righteousness if we settle into a comfortable arrangement with the status-quo, with the world as it is now. We must work, as God leads and gifts us, for JUSTICE, righteousness, now, and we must long for, desire, the coming reign of righteousness.

As Luther put it on this very beatitude, our hungering and thirsting, "looks for nothing and cares for nothing except the accomplishment and maintenance of the right; despising everything that hinders this end. If you cannot make the world completely pious, then do what you can." Ultimately, then, this means we desire God himself, and his kingly righteousness to be revealed in us, and in the world.

II. Hunger and Thirst

Our second point, then, is hunger and thirst. Blessed are those who HUNGER and THIRST for righteousness. It is important to see, and St. Augustine

developed this at length, that virtually all our problems have to do with our DESIRES. We are desiring creatures in a very fundamental way. Yet, our desires are disordered. We naturally want the wrong things (right things in the wrong way). We constantly substitute the creation for the Creator, the kingdoms of this world for the kingdom of God. Human hungering and thirsting are easily derailed.

The world hungers and thirsts for happiness, for blessedness, and they are starving. For happiness is an end achieved only indirectly, in the pursuit of higher goods. In Isaiah's words: Why do you spend your money for that which is NOT bread, and your labor for that which does NOT satisfy? Yet, desire is not eradicated by the gospel. It needs to be laid hold of by the Spirit and directed to a new object. This text, then, is about the healing of our desiring hearts. They MUST be re-ordered to God and His kingdom.

So here – in measuring our desire - we have is a barometer for the state of our souls. "Hunger and thirst" are very strong, vivid words. They are words which speak to our holy passions. They are not primarily cognitive or mental categories. They are visceral, they pertain to the depths of a person's longings, to your spiritually rumbling stomach, to your spiritually parched throat.

This hunger is not akin to missing a meal or two and feeling hunger pangs. It speaks of a burning intensity, of an appetite that is not easily sated, or curbed, no matter how often God fills it. Calvin says of these people that they – in the midst of want and loss of one's rights - lift up anxious sighs, straining after nothing but what is right, they languish like starving men. So hunger and thirst here are desperate words. Those with this appetite experience a sort of spiritual famine. Hunger is a kind of starvation; thirsting is a kind of dehydration.

This is the poor in spirit metaphor shifted into the realm of our appetites. This is the panting of which the Psalmist spoke: As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul thirsts for the living God. (no panting for righteousness, w/o panting for the living God himself)

The Christian life is not a humanly manageable, comfortable life. It must have a certain vigorous, joyful desperation about it, if it is to be authentic. Hungry and thirsty people are desperate people, they are single-minded and in earnest about finding food and drink. And God EXPECTS his children to be in this state. That is why Isaiah can say: Come, everyone who THIRSTS, come to the waters; and he who has no money come buy and EAT.

And this is why the One to whom Isaiah pointed, stood up in the temple and said: If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water. The glorified Jesus gives us the gift of the Spirit, as living water, to satisfy our parched thirsty existence. Even as he himself is the bread of heaven come down to satisfy our hunger. And this summons to come is found all the way at the very end of the Bible in Revelation 22: let the

one who is thirsty come, and let the one who desires, take the water of life without price. It is the last command of Holy Scripture to the church.

So hungering and thirsting for righteousness means a burning pursuit of God in Christ. It means that communion with the exalted Christ, and through Christ, with the Holy Trinity, is what we hunger and thirst for above all. To long for social justice – even properly defined -- more than one longs for the light of God for his own sake, is idolatry. God, in JC, is chiefly what we are hungering and thirsting for. Listen to Psalm 63 if you want to hear the accents of desperation, of panting for God:

You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water. ² I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory. ³ Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you.

He is the homeland of our heart's true desires, for He is the DESIRE of the nations. He has become to us righteousness from God. He is, in Jeremiah's words: The LORD our righteousness. To thirst for him IS to thirst for righteousness. Concretely, this longing for Christ our righteousness can be correlated to, it is proportionate to, our longing for Holy Scripture. That is the place we must go, the only authorized place, where we are to hear the voice of the glorified Christ address us in the Spirit (Face of God for now).

David exemplifies this throughout his magnificent ode to the law in Psalm 119. He longs, pants, weeps, groans, and desires nothing but the word of God.

Job, in chapter 23, says: I have not departed from the commands of his lips; I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my daily bread.

Jeremiah famously said: When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight, for I bear your name, Lord God Almighty.

Amos tells us that spiritual famine is produced by the absence of hearing God's word. A famine for the Word of God.

Jesus in the wilderness, literally physically hungry, tells us that man's deepest hunger is to live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. The fourth century biblical scholar, Jerome, said: ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ. We might tweak that to read: an absence of desire for scripture is an absence of hungering and thirsting for Christ. There is no surer way to measure the intensity of our hunger, then by asking about our desire our sense of perpetual need for Holy Scripture. Scripture is the oasis in our wilderness pilgrimage. The place for --- at least temporarily--- satisfying our hunger and slaking our thirst.

III. Being Satisfied

And that brings us to our third (main) point: being satisfied. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst (passionately desire and long) for righteousness, for they SHALL BE SATISFIED. Remember, when the Son of God was conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary, Mary went on to extol the Lord God in her famous Magnificat. She says there that God has sent the rich away empty-handed, and that he has filled the poor with good things. That declaration is being fleshed out for us here by Mary's Son. The rich, or the bloated, the complacent and self-satisfied, will be sent away, but the poor, those who hunger and thirst, shall be *filled with good things*.

Satisfied means, literally, to be filled, to have plenty. It is a state of abundance and perpetual refreshment. The word was used for the fattening of animals, and of the crowds after Jesus multiplied the loaves and fishes and they ate. He is not only the One who gives us the fountain of living waters for our thirst. He is the bread of heaven who satisfies our hunger.

As usual, here we must refer to the already and the not yet. The now and the later. Even now, Jesus gives us his Spirit, his Word, his body and blood in the sacrament. He fills us, satisfies us, now. But not in such a way that our hungering and thirsting ever ends. If anything, he whets our appetites for more.

It is, paradoxically, a satisfaction that leads to longing, a filling that leads to new hungering and thirsting. We find – or should find – that our hunger increases in the very act of being satisfied. He gives us the living water of the Spirit, but it is only an earnest, a down-payment, which is to cause us to groan for our full inheritance. He speaks to us and shows himself to us in the written Word, and we yearn to hear and see the incarnate Word face to face. He feeds us with the bread and wine of the Supper, and yes, we are refreshed, but we yearn for the coming wedding banquet. In the words of the great hymn from the 12c. theologian, Bernard of Clairvaux:

We taste Thee, O Thou living Bread,
And long to feast upon Thee still;
We drink of Thee, the Fountain-head,
And thirst our souls from Thee to fill!

Thus, our full satisfaction, our full filling is profoundly future. We long for the coming eschatological kingdom of God and nothing short of that will satisfy our deepest desires. How could it be otherwise?

If we care about righteousness, that means we care about rectifying the past. The victims of the holocaust, of Hitler and Stalin, and all the small acts of oppression and injustice which litter the world's sordid history. No merely

historical future righteousness can give us what we want. Nor can it answer the cries of the martyrs and all the suffering and now dead innocent ones, who cry: How long, O Lord, how long, shall until you avenge our blood?

Thirsting for righteousness without thirsting for bodily resurrection is inconceivable: As David says, in Psalm 17: As for me, I will be vindicated and will see your face; when I awake (that is, when I am raised), I will be satisfied (our word) with seeing your likeness. We are looking for the day which, in the words of the Book of Revelation, chapter 7, they shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore, for the lamb in the midst of the throne shall be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water.

In short, to hunger and thirst is, in the words of 2 Peter 3, to look for (pant after) a new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness – undefiled righteousness, and only righteousness --- dwells. Amen.

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