

Hungering for the Righteousness of God

[Scriptures: Matthew 5:6](#)

Introduction

"You are what you eat." Nutritionists tell us that our appetites determine our diet, our diet determines our intake, and our intake determines our health.

"You are what you eat" applies in the spiritual realm as well. Jesus challenges us to look at our spiritual appetite with the penetrating words of the Fourth Beatitude: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, because they will be filled" (Matthew 5:6).

In this simple sentence, Jesus tells us that our hunger determines our spiritual health. In order to grasp its meaning for us, we need to explore three key principles.

I. The Possibility of righteousness

If we want to understand the Fourth Beatitude, we need to know what Jesus means by the term righteousness. The word occurs only once in the other four gospels. However, it occurs seven times in Matthew's gospel, including five times in the Sermon on the Mount. The word is a mystery to us. We know it has something to do with being right and doing right, but that's about it.

Whenever you come upon a term in the Bible you don't understand, it's always helpful to look at other passages of Scripture that may shed light on it. With that in mind, let's look at four other uses of this word in the Sermon on the Mount.

A. Righteousness is a lifestyle that distinguishes us as true Christians and invites opposition from the world

Jesus said, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness" (Matt. 5:10). That's the eighth and final beatitude. Taking the fourth and eighth beatitudes together, we get something like this: We are to hunger and to thirst after a kind of life that will cause some people to persecute us for our faith. **So righteousness is a lifestyle that distinguishes us as true Christians and invites opposition from the world.**

B. Righteousness starts in the heart and changes a person from the inside out

In the second use Jesus said, "For I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:20). The Pharisees had concocted a religious system built around attendance at the temple. It involved intricate rules and regulations and meant following precepts and traditions. It was very professional and very routine. It was like wearing cheap perfume that you splash on to make yourself smell good. It's not really a part of you and it can't cover the odor underneath. **True righteousness starts in the heart and changes a person from the inside out.**

C. Righteousness causes us to seek God's approval above everything else

Most of us already know the fourth occurrence by heart: "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you" (Matthew 6:33). This touches the priorities of life. What is it that you are seeking in life? Fame? Fortune? Career advancement? A good salary? A secure future? A happy retirement? A marriage partner? The fulfillment of your dreams? As good as those things may be, they aren't the most important things in life. **Put God's kingdom and God's righteousness first. When you do, everything else you need will be given to you.** Seeking "His righteousness" means letting His Word set the standard for your life. It means seeking to do that which is pleasing to him.

Put these four passages together and what do you have? **We are to hunger and thirst after:**

A truly Christian lifestyle ... that changes us from the inside out ... so that we no longer seek the praise of men ... but causes us to seek God's approval above everything else.

This kind of life is possible for all of us. In fact, Jesus plainly says that anyone who lives this way is blessed by God. Sounds good, doesn't it? So why don't we all live this way? That question leads us directly to the second important principle.

II. The power of hunger

The people Jesus addressed understood what it meant to be hungry or thirsty. In that region, few were prosperous, and more than likely, at one time or another, those listeners that day had experienced the kind of hunger he's talking about here. They lived in poverty without grocery stores and refrigerators and running water. They may have gone days without food. They were well acquainted with hunger pangs.

We have never known true hunger like these people? To us, hunger means waiting ten extra minutes for the rolls to come out of the oven, or thirty minutes for the preacher to finish. Hunger for most of us is that sensation in your stomach that makes us stop at McDonald's for fries and a Coke even though we just ate two hours ago. We are the best fed people on the face of the earth. Our problem isn't finding something to eat, it's losing the fat that comes from eating too much.

Jesus uses the metaphors of eating and drinking as the motivating power to live a righteous life. Let me make four observations that help us fill the spiritual hunger of our hearts that leads to a righteous life.

A. You have to want it

No one can force you to eat. The old adage is true: You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink. Now, granted for most of us, it does not take much forcing to eat. Like food, you have to want to live a righteous life. The verbs for hunger and thirst mean an intense desire, an ardent craving, and all-consuming pursuit. It is as though you are parched and nothing will stop you from getting to the water fountain to drink. Or, you are so hungry you will pursue food at all costs. It's a desperate kind of hunger.

In a different context, to describe a person who is ambitious, passionate, and desperate to achieve or to succeed we will say "he's hungry." It is that same kind of passion and drive that should motivate the believer to pursue righteousness.

Listen to the psalmist, David, to see if you can hear the longing, the drive, in his pursuit of righteousness. "As a deer longs for streams of water, so I long for You, God. I thirst for God, the living God. When can I come and appear before God?" (Psa. 42:1-2). "God, You

are my God; I eagerly seek You. I thirst for You; my body faints for You in a land that is dry, desolate, and without water" (Psa. 63:1).

Hunger and thirst are intense desires. It is that same intensity that we need in seeking righteousness. Do you have that kind of desperation for a truly Christian lifestyle that changes us from the inside out so that we no longer seek the praise of men but causes us to seek God's approval above everything else?

If You Want To Be Hungry For God Say This Prayer Daily. "Heavenly Father, Help me to be hungry and thirsty for your righteousness. I desire to live righteously before you. Help me put you first in every area of my life, to seek after the things of your kingdom, and to believe you that everything else that I need you will provide. In your son Jesus name I pray. Amen."

B. Take action

Appetites aren't filled until you do something about it. It is one thing to intellectually say I am hungry and desire food. It is quite another to take the steps to satisfy your hunger and to quench your thirst. At some point you have to go eat or drink.

By the way, a loss of appetite is a sign of illness. Physically, we know something is wrong when we have no desire to eat. The same is true spiritually. When we no longer hunger and thirst for time alone with God through Bible reading and prayer, or aren't committed to the worship of God, or fail to get alarmed over our sinful condition and the sin of the world, we see clear signs of spiritual sickness. When we no longer take the appropriate action of developing and deepening our relationship with God, a warning light - like on the dashboard of your car - needs to be illuminated, signaling that something is wrong. We need help.

The action we need to take is to go to the source - the bread of life. Jesus said, "I am the bread of life. No one who comes to Me will ever be hungry, and no one who believes in Me will ever be thirsty again ... I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread he will live forever. The bread that I will give for the life of the world is My flesh" (John 6:35, 51). When we are spiritually hungry we will come to the source of spiritual life - Jesus himself. Our real hunger is for God. Saint Augustine was right when he said: "O God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in you."

Herein is a fundamental problem. To fill this spiritual hunger and thirst, many people are going to the wrong places - pleasure, performance, or possessions; living on the junk food of another job, another marriage, another vacation; or thinking, "All I need to do is read the Bible every now and then, attend Sunday school and worship every once and a while, serve in ministry when I feel like it." God says, "Why do you spend your money on junk food, your hard-earned cash on cotton candy? Listen to me, listen well: Eat only the best, fill yourself with only the finest" (Is. 55:2 The Message).

Many people today are looking for satisfaction in all the wrong places, trying to satisfy the craving of their hearts with junk of this world, or in the church and are spiritually malnourished. You need to come to Jesus - the source of life itself. You need to feed upon Him with balanced, daily diet of prayer and the study of God's Word. You need to drink from His cup through life giving worship. You need to feast on His love and his grace, His forgiveness, and His power.

C. Keep coming back for more

Grammatically Jesus expressed the two Greek verbs, "to hunger" and "to thirst," as present

participles, which implies continuous action. Read the fourth beatitude closely: Those who are filled are not those who have their hunger and thirst met, but those who are continually hungering and thirsting. A person doesn't stop hungering and thirsting for righteousness once he or she has crossed the line of faith. It is a constant pursuit to live a life of righteousness, to yearn to be more and more like Christ.

Are you hungering and thirsting for righteousness? Is it a continual pursuit? Are you coming back for more? I have discovered that hungering and thirsting for righteousness is like a narcotic. You get hooked. You become addicted. You need more. You keep coming back. Once you have encountered the living God nothing else satisfies. You want more and more of him.

John MacArthur said, "If you claim a relationship with Christ but you aren't hungering and thirsting for righteousness, you need to honestly question whether you know Him."

D. Eat the whole thing

Believers don't seek bits and pieces of righteousness. They seek all the righteousness of Christ in their desire to be like him.

What Jesus is saying is not "Give me a piece of bread;" but, rather, "Give me the whole loaf." Literally Matthew 5:6 could read, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after all righteousness." The Christian is never satisfied because no matter how much righteousness he has he doesn't have all that is available.

The person who hungers and thirsts after righteousness wants it all. They want all of God.

Could that be the problem with too many Christians, today? We just want enough of God to appease not to change us. We want enough of God to get us into right standing, avoiding the fire of hell, but not enough to bring on righteousness - the kind that would radically change our lives. As long as it is superficial change, we're okay. A little cosmetic surgery is fine. Any more than that we're uncomfortable. We are like Wilbur Rees who wrote

Are you ready to take all of God? If so, then, you will receive the benefit of this Beatitude. Here's the third and final principle.

III. The promise of fulfillment

The final part of the verse is a promise from God: "They will be filled." With what? Food? No. Money? No. Long life? No. Promotion? No. Happiness? No. A perfect family? No. A trouble-free life? No. What then?

A. You will be filled with righteousness

If you want righteousness, you can have it. If you want for a truly Christian lifestyle that changes us from the inside out so that we no longer seek the praise of men but causes us to seek God's approval above everything else, you can have it.

Let me go out on a limb and make a bold statement. **Whatever you want in the spiritual realm, you can have if you want it badly enough. I don't think we appreciate the importance of that truth. Most of us are about as close to God to now as we want to be.** We have about as much joy as we want, about as much peace as we want. For the most part, you are where you are right now because that's where you want to be. If you were hungry for something better from God, you could have it.

If you want it, you can have a close walk with God.

If you want it, you can have a better marriage.

If you want to, you can do God's will.

If you want to, you can grow spiritually.

If you want to, you can become a man of God or a woman of God.

If you want to, you can change deeply-ingrained habits.

If you want to, you can break destructive patterns of behavior.

When you hunger and thirst after righteousness, when you want what God wants more than anything in the world, you will have it.

B. You will be filled with Jesus himself

I close with this final thought. Jesus' appeal is always personal. He never says, "Come and join the church" or "Come and be baptized" or "Come and give money." He simply says, "Come unto me." When Jesus says, "You will be filled," He means "You will be filled with Jesus himself!"

If you are hungry, come and eat of the Bread of Life.

If you are thirsty, come and drink of the Water of Life.

If are weary and heavy-laden, come and find rest.

If you are guilty, come and be forgiven.

If you are far from God, come back home again.

The French philosopher Pascal said that there is a "God-shaped vacuum" inside every human heart. Since nature abhors a vacuum, if we don't fill it with God, we will fill it with something else. So many of us have filled our hearts with the junk food of the world. No wonder we are so unhappy. No wonder we jump from one job to another and from relationship to another.

We have full stomachs and empty hearts!

We're like a little child who won't let go of the marble in order to receive a diamond. "No, I won't give up my weekend affair for eternal joy. Trade a broken marriage and a failed career for peace and forgiveness? Forget it. Give up my drug addiction and be forgiven for all my sins? No way, man. You say I can replace my anger and bitterness with peace and contentment? I can't take the chance. Sorry."

No wonder we stay the way we are. We're trapped in the pit of a thousand excuses. We'd rather have misery and pain than risk it all on Jesus.

Sixteen hundred years ago Saint Augustine explained both the problem and the solution: "O God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in you." You will never be happy until you put God first in your life. And you can never do that until you surrender your life to Jesus Christ once and for all.

Let me give you some good news. In the kingdom of God, everything begins with a seeking heart! Salvation begins with a hungry heart. If you are tired of the life you've been living, you can make a new start.

Whatever you want in the spiritual realm, you can have if you want it badly enough. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." Are you hungry? Are you thirsty? If you are, you can be filled. This is the promise of God to hungry hearts and thirsty souls.