

“Searching for Shalom”

Matthew 5:6

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At the end of my junior year in France, I ran out of money about two days before my flight home. I just went hungry, and I can tell you I've never been as grateful for airline food as when I caught the plane home two days later. Of course, that was in the days where airplane food was free.

All of us get physically hungry. We have to keep coming back for another meal to keep us going. Have you ever fasted from eating? Go even 24 hours without food, and that sure puts you in touch with your need. We can all relate to hunger.

Today's beatitude is about hunger. It's the last of the first group of blessings, the ones that have to do with need: those who are poor in spirit, poor in happiness, poor in power, and now poor in righteousness. Jesus promises to bless spiritually needy, sad, weak people, at least week as the world sees it; and now, people who don't measure up.

These characteristics all describe a kind of emptiness, but they're good in the sense that God meets us in them. God helps us in our time of need. So these aren't *commands*, they're *descriptions* of life in the kingdom. You could say they're not guidelines, they're gifts. They aren't *qualifications* for getting into heaven, they're descriptions of what happens to us when God gets a hold of us. If you know you need God, if you're repentant over your sin, if you trust in God, if you want wholeness and holiness, then that's from God, and he blesses it. You could sum up by saying these are the qualities of the person who hungers for righteousness.

The next time we see the word righteousness is in verse 10, after Jesus has shared the blessings not of emptiness but of fullness; the person who is full of mercy, full of purity, full of peacemaking; the person persecuted for demonstrating the fullness of righteousness.

I want to talk about those the basic ideas of this beatitude: hunger, righteousness, and how they're related.

In many ways in his earthly career, Jesus says the very deepest hunger is for righteousness, *dikaiosune*, for right relationships, because it's a longing for God to have his way down here. Righteousness is at the heart of who God is.

You can think of it in a Trinitarian way, since God is Trinity, the one-in-three, three-in-one God. Here's what I mean. God the Father is righteous, or just. Jesus is the Righteous One, who came to show us who the Father is. The Holy Spirit gives the gift of righteousness to everyone who turns to him and is sorry for their sins. God the Father makes us right with him because his Spirit has taken us into his life, and one day he will finish the work of making us like Jesus.

So, sure, righteousness is living uprightly and honestly with other people. But even more than that, it's doing the Father's will because we're in a relationship with him, the

source of goodness and grace. God justifies us—that's *his* work—and makes us just or right—that's the goal in our life. That comes through in the words of the prophet Isaiah:

"Maintain justice and do what is right, for my salvation is close at hand and my *righteousness* will soon be revealed. (Isaiah 56:1)

Did God reveal his righteousness? Yes, he did it in the person of Jesus. Paul said God presented Jesus as a sacrifice of atonement,

...so as to be *just* and the one who *justifies* those who have faith in Jesus.
(Romans 3:26b)

Jesus makes us right with God because:

Righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.
(Romans 3:22)

Paul continues,

For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (Ephesians 2:10)

It's all tied together: God is righteous, and he *justifies* us or *saves* us in order that *we* might do right, too.

Matthew's gospel is very concerned with God's righteousness. God is righteous because whatever he says and does is always in line with his own holiness. What he says and does for his people is always in line with the promises he makes, too, because he's a promise-making and promise-keeping God. He is faithful to keep his covenant promises to his people, to save them from all their enemies, and to vindicate everyone who turns to him.

God calls his people to live righteously. That means, if we're in a relationship with God, we live by his word, doing right, like he tells the prophet Hosea,

I will betroth you to me forever;
I will betroth you in righteousness and justice,
in love and compassion. (Hosea 2:19))

If we're really living for Jesus, the Righteous One, we love righteousness. If we really belong to Jesus, the Holy One of God, then we live holy lives marked by mercy, compassion, and justice.

Sow for yourselves righteousness,
reap the fruit of unfailing love,
and break up your unplowed ground;

for it is time to seek the LORD,
 until he comes
 and showers righteousness on you. (Hosea 10:12)

Is it any wonder John the Baptist said we have to produce fruit in keeping with repentance? That we have to behave in a way that makes God happy? Righteousness is actually doing God's will.

The whole point of Jesus' mission is to fulfill God's righteousness. God's kingdom and our salvation come *in* him, *through* him, *by* him. If you want to know about the righteousness of God, it's only possible because God comes to us in Jesus. That's why when John didn't want to baptize Jesus, Jesus told him,

"Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented. (Matthew 3:15).

Matthew's showing us that Jesus *is* the righteousness of God, the truth, justice, goodness, *purity* of God in human form. His life is all about submitting to the Father, worshiping the Father, and his righteousness is an out-flowing of that life. It's why he says later in the Sermon on the Mount,

But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. (Matthew 5:33)

Jesus wants us to hunger and thirst for righteousness.

We hunger and thirst for a lot of things: to be known, to be loved, to matter. My Mom was the youngest of seven children, always valued, always the baby of the family. She can hardly imagine anybody not liking her.

I'm kind of the opposite: I'm kind of surprised if somebody does like me. Like when my advisor in my doctoral program emailed me and said, "We need to talk," my first thought is, "Oh my gosh, he's going to kick me out of the program!" I worried for a whole day until we got together. And then, it turned out everything was fine. Now, my mom's concerns might be different from mine, and you might have different desires than I do. But all of us want to be valued, to be accepted, to know we're going to be okay.

But I think our most intense longing is for righteousness itself. Jesus says, if you long for that, it's going to be filled, because it's from God. The teacher in Ecclesiastes said that God put eternity in our hearts (Ecclesiastes 3:11), and that's why we have such deep hunger. We're all spiritually hungry and thirsty, and the problem is we try to fill that emptiness with things beside God. Like the Lord says to Isaiah the prophet,

"Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters;
 And you who have no money come, buy and eat
 Come, buy wine and milk

Without money and without cost.
 "Why do you spend money for what is not bread,
 And your wages for what does not satisfy?
 Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good,
 And delight yourself in abundance. (Isaiah 55:1-2).

Sometimes we spend on food that can't fill our hunger, and on stuff that doesn't satisfy the soul. We try it with money, education, toys, and entertainment, with controlling others or with moping over the past. All this just points to the deeper need. C. S. Lewis says in "The Weight of Glory" that this is just messing around:

"We are half hearted creatures, fooling around with drink and sex and ambition, when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea, we are far too easily pleased."

Maybe it's not that we're too hard to please—we settle for too little, when God has something much better in mind for us.

That's why Jesus told the woman at the well,

Whoever drinks this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. (John 4:13-14).

That's why he told the crowd,

You shouldn't be so concerned about perishable things like food. Spend your energy seeking the eternal life that I, the Son of Man, can give you. For God the Father has sent me for that very purpose" (John 6:26-27).

Only Jesus can satisfy. So why mess around with other tasteless food? It's like eating Cheez Whiz instead of real Swiss Gruyere or good Wisconsin cheddar. Cheez Whiz fills you up, but it leaves you empty afterwards, and it leaves a bad taste. Only Jesus can satisfy your soul with real joy and peace.

So, what are you hungering and thirsting for today? Where's your heart? We have to get in touch with our hunger daily, so God can fill it. Like David wrote in the Psalm 42,

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 42:1-11)

If you lose your physical appetite, it's not going to be long before you starve, and it's the same spiritually. We need to hunger after God every day, and let him use that to draw us to what can fill us. Do you have a passion for Jesus that captivates you? The Apostle Paul did:

What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. (Phil. 3: 8-9).

Paul's saying what makes him right with God isn't being good enough or having enough credentials, it's trusting in Jesus. That gives him the passion to put aside all the cares of the world and pursue Christ. Do we do that? Sometimes I think we get pretty casual, and long for other things instead of the righteousness of God.

I heard from a friend in Seattle last week who went down to Pioneer Square near Skid Row to serve food to homeless people and do an outreach ministry. A guy named David came up looking for food. He was wearing a long blue robe and had long black fingernails. It turned out he was a Satan worshipper.

One of the Christians shared the good news about Jesus and invited people to trust him, and they were amazed when David went forward. He was crying. Tony saw David was wearing a pentagram necklace. The Christians asked him to take it off, and when he did they threw it away. Then David took off his robe and threw it away, and he was wearing normal street clothes underneath. Last of all he took off his Satanic ring.

David kept saying, "I'm in shock." He explained he was in shock because he thought Satan would kill him for betraying him, but instead he experienced the power of God.

What made the difference? David was impressed with the holiness of Jesus Christ; he was freed to be able to trust Jesus, to enter into life in his name, and to leave behind the spiritual slavery of his old life. That's God's way: the righteousness of Jesus can save us, and then it's his gift to us of a new way of living.