

Happiness Through Hunger And Thirst

Matthew 5:6

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Let's read Matthew 5:6. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled."

How is your appetite? Appetite is an important thing. I realize that when I say that, some of you don't want to have the appetite you have. You may want to curb your appetite. You may want to cut back on your eating and maybe lose weight. But appetite is a good thing.

Appetite is a sign of life and health. If you're dead, you don't eat. If you're alive, you eat. If you're healthy, you're eating. It's also a roadway to growth. If you're going to grow physically, you're going to have to eat. Remember when you were little and your Mom would say, "Eat your vegetables if you want to grow up and be strong"? So we need to eat in order to grow. Also, appetite is a source of enjoyment. This is where we get into trouble. We really like the taste of certain foods because it's pleasurable. God has designed it that way.

Now what is true of the body is also true of the soul. Just as the outer man or person needs food and water, so does the inner man need the Word of God. Jesus said, when tempted by the devil in Matthew 4:4, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." So it's not enough to just feed your body with bread; we need God's Word, spiritual food, if we're going to grow and mature.

Not only is it important that we eat, but what we eat is important. I have a pray-for-me confession to make. I traveled this past week. I got up early Monday morning, because my plane left at 8:00 to go from Houston to Orlando. I didn't have time to eat breakfast. I rushed onto the plane, got off the plane, found my rental car, got to Merritt Island and checked into my hotel to get over to the conference. By that time, I was really hungry.

As churches often do, they had a basket gift waiting for me in the hotel room. It was mostly chocolates, M&Ms and things like that. But what was included was a big bag of cheddar-cheese popcorn, which I never knew existed. I thought, Praise God! Praise Jehovah! I ripped that bag open. I needed to eat better food, I can't only eat popcorn, but I thought I'd just taste it. You know how that went; right? I stuffed my face with cheddar-cheese popcorn, and my hands were bright orange. This popcorn was amazing; it was like Cheetos and popcorn merged together! I can't believe that I ate the whole bag. It deadened my appetite for good food. When I got over to the conference, they had lunch for us. I said, "No, thank you; I'm full of popcorn."

So not only should we have a good appetite, but we need to be careful what we eat. You heard the saying, "You are what you eat," well, it's true in the spiritual realm, as well. If we are Christians living in the kingdom of heaven, we will have a different appetite than the unsaved, unbelieving world. The unsaved hunger for pleasure, possessions and power. John describes

it in 1 John 2:16: “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.”

What a contrast to that if you are a child of God. If you have truly been born again, you will “hunger and thirst for righteousness.” Each one of these Beatitudes is a characteristic of those who are living in the kingdom of heaven. Beatitude number one has as its promise “theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Then the eighth Beatitude, in verse 10, says, “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Everything between these two Beatitudes describes those who live in the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God.

I want you to notice how this Beatitude ties in with the Beatitudes that came before it. Verse 3 says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” It starts with poverty of spirit, my admission that I am a bankrupt sinner before a holy, righteous God. I admit that I have nothing with which to commend myself to God. I am poor spiritually. That leads to verse 4: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” So it starts with the fact that I see myself as a sinner before God, and then I mourn over my sin. This is a mourning over sin, in the context of this Beatitude. I see myself as a sinner before God. Then it produces meekness, verse 5. “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” A meek individual is one who is submitted to God and His Word, and even to chastening from God. It's submission to the will of God found in the Word of God.

So I am a sinner. I have nothing to commend myself to God. I mourn over my sin. I submit myself to God's authority, and now we have Beatitude number four, in verse 6. Now I “hunger and thirst for righteousness,” and then the promise of this Beatitude is that I “shall be filled.”

The fourth Beatitude also opens with the word “blessed.” Each Beatitude opens with this word. Some translations have “happy” or “O how happy,” but a better idea is that God smiles on us. God approves of us. I like the idea of God applauding for us. God is blessed by us, and we have the blessing of God and the approval of God in our soul. So you might render this, “Happy are the hungry and thirsty.” Notice it's not hungry and thirsty for happiness, but hungry and thirsty for holiness or righteousness. If you make happiness the direct pursuit of your life, you won't be happy. But if you pursue God and His righteousness, then blessings or happiness will come into your heart.

There are three questions I want to ask about this Beatitude. The first is, “What kind of righteousness do we hunger for?” Before we look at what it means to hunger and thirst, we need to know what we are hungry and thirsty for. What kind of righteousness is Jesus referring to?

First of all, it's not a self-righteousness, like that of the Pharisees and scribes. Jesus, in His Sermon on the Mount, says in Matthew 5:20, “For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” What does He mean by that? You have to have a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees. In the mind of the Jew, there was no one more righteous than a scribe or a Pharisee, especially the Pharisees. They were the separated ones,

dedicated to keeping every jot and tittle of God's law and commandments.

But here's the problem: their righteousness was only external. Their righteousness wasn't of the heart. Their righteousness was legalistic righteousness. It was just keeping the outward ordinance of the law. But the Bible says that God looks at the heart. It's fine to have the outward, but it starts with the heart, because that's where God looks. If you go on in the passage, Jesus actually says that if you have anger in your heart toward another, you have already committed murder. And if you lust after someone longingly, you have already committed adultery in your heart.

So the Pharisees thought they were good, because they had never committed adultery. But God says it's what is in your heart. Maybe you have an outward religiosity that is legalistic, but that's not the kind of righteousness that we are to hunger and thirst for. The Pharisees were neither holy nor happy. Legalism doesn't bring happiness.

Secondly, I would say that this righteousness is not primarily imputed, personal or positional righteousness. It includes it, but is not the focus of Christ here. Positional righteousness is what theologians call "justification," which is the act of God whereby He declares, positionally, the believing sinner to be righteous based on the finished work of Christ on the Cross. I have taught this doctrine of justification by faith found in Romans 8:1: "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus." That is positional righteousness.

Let me say something very important about this: all Christians share equally in the righteousness of Christ imputed to them positionally. Your standing doesn't differ from Christian to Christian; we are all as righteous as Christ, because He has clothed us in His righteousness. We are in Christ and so perfectly righteous. You can't add to that and you can't take away from that. This is foundational for living the Christian life.

In Christ, you are forgiven, but that's not the end of the Christian life. There is what we call "sanctification." That is practical righteousness or holiness. That, I believe, is what Jesus is talking about in this Beatitude that we are to hunger and thirst after. So it's not the self-righteousness of the Pharisees. It's not the imputed righteousness of Christ that we get when we are born again. That is developed in the Pauline epistles of Romans, Ephesians, Galatians, et cetera. But this is what's called "imparted righteousness" or "practical righteousness." Theologians use the term "sanctification."

All Christians have been justified. All Christians are being sanctified, but now it is different from our positional righteousness. Some Christians are more sanctified; some Christians are more holy and more like Christ. The goal of sanctification, which is a life-long process, is that God is trying to make you more like Jesus. We all know Christians who are a lot like Christ, and we also know Christians who are not much like Christ at all and they have a long way to go. If you ask yourself, "How much like Christ am I?" you may answer, "Well, I've got a long way to go." So I'm to hunger and thirst after this kind of righteousness. "Make me like Jesus." That's the prayer: "Lord, make me like You. Mold me and shape me and make me more like You. Give

me Your love and Your holiness, and help me to live out that righteousness.” So this is practical sanctification.

I’ve told you many times, and I’ll tell you again, that salvation has three tenses: I’ve been saved—justified; I’m being saved—sanctified; and I will be saved—glorified. When I get to heaven, I’ll be perfectly holy and righteous. But right now, I’m in process; God is making me more like Jesus Christ.

So what is Jesus telling us to hunger and thirst for? It’s to hunger and thirst to live a holy life, to live right with God and man, to live through the power of the Holy Spirit. The chief thing the Holy Spirit wants to do in us is to produce holiness. Bishop J. C. Ryle said, “He means those who desire, above all things, to be entirely conformed to the mind of God. They long not so much as to be rich or wealthy or learned as to be holy.” It’s a desire to be holy. God says, “Be ye holy, as I am holy.” It’s a hungering and thirsting to be like God, Who is holy.

It involves two things. It involves a hatred of sin and a hunger for holiness. If I’m going to “hunger and thirst for righteousness,” I need to hate sin and I need to love and pursue righteousness. In verse 4 of the Beatitudes, it says, “Blessed are those who mourn.” Notice it doesn’t stop there. It’s not enough to just mourn over your sin. It’s not enough to say, “I’m poor in spirit and I’m mourning over it.” Now you need to “hunger and thirst for righteousness.” I need to hunger to live a holy life.

James Boyce says, “The people who are described in this verse are those who want to be righteous to live a holy, obedient life; to walk according to God’s holy Word.” So the Word of God is involved. The Holy Spirit and God’s holy Word work in our hearts to produce holiness of living. Do you want to live an obedient, righteous life? Then hunger and thirst after righteousness. That is right-living before God and man.

Here is my second question: “What does it mean to hunger, and what does it mean to thirst?” The term “hunger and thirst” is a metaphor. It’s metaphorical language. It’s not literally saying to be thirsty and hungry. But it is interesting that Jesus is talking to people who literally knew what it was to be hungry and thirsty. Today, we have a Stop-N-Go on every corner. You go into a gas station and you get your Super Gulp, put it in your car, put a straw in it and drink your soda as you drive. We have running water in our homes, bottled water everywhere we go. I grabbed a bottle of water to carry on the airplane.

So we don’t really know what it’s like to be thirsty. Nor do we really know what it’s like to be really hungry; there’s food everywhere. My big concern is not will I eat; my big concern is where will I eat, how much will I eat and how good is the food I’m going to eat. Can you imagine a world with no In-N-Out Burger? No Costco? No grocery stores?

In some of my travels around the world, I’ve gone to rural places, to places way out in the country. “Where do we stop to get something to eat? There’s nothing out here but farms.” Are you going to eat raw corn? There are no grocery stores.

So the people in Jesus' time would sometimes go days without food. I've never experienced that. If I try to fast, it's about half a day. I start to get visions, but they're not from God. I don't know what it's like to go days without food or not able to get a drink, but Jesus said, "Do you know what it is to truly be hungry? To be truly thirsty?" He uses this term to speak metaphorically of an intense desire. He said, "Blessed are those who intensely desire or hunger and thirst after righteousness."

There are a lot of people who picture this spiritual hungering and thirsting in the pages of Scripture, and let me mention just a few. When Moses, in Exodus 33:18, was commissioned by God to lead the people of Israel out of bondage into the Promised Land, he petitioned God, saying, "Please, show me Your glory." I was reading one commentary on this, and the commentator said that this is the prayer that God most loves to answer. I like that. Remember this episode with Moses? God told Moses that he couldn't look at Him and live. But God said, "I'm going to hide you in this cave, and I'm going to cover the cave with My hand, I'll pass by, and as I do, I'll remove My hand and you'll see My afterglow. You'll see My glory." That's the hunger we are to have here, to see God's glory as God truly is.

I think of David as a man after God's own heart, who hungered and thirsted for God. In Psalm 42:1, David said, "As the deer pants for the water brooks, so pants my soul for You, O God." Like a thirsty deer headed for the stream, "God, I'm thirsty for You." Again, in Psalm 63:1, David cried out, "O God, You are my God; early will I seek You; my soul thirsts for You in a dry and thirsty land where there is no water."

Have you ever prayed that prayer? "Lord, I'm thirsty for You. Lord, I'm hungry for You. Lord, I want to see Your glory. I need You in my life."

Then in the New Testament, there is Paul the apostle. In Philippians 3:10, Paul said in his prayer, "...that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death." Paul had known Christ for many years; he had been a Christian for a long time. But his prayer was, "I want to know Him."

That's the paradox of this Beatitude, by the way. "Blessed are those who hunger....They shall be filled." So He fills us, but we thirst for more. You're hungry and He satisfies us, but we are hungry for more. It's that thirst and hunger that is satisfied, but we want to know Him more. It's the pursuit of the believer. That's the passion of our heart and soul: "I want to be holy like Him."

In that Philippians passage, Paul goes on to say in chapter 3, verses 12-14, "Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching..."—the word means "I'm straining"—"...forward to those things which are ahead. I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." So when Paul says, "I reach" or "I press," Paul is talking about that hunger that Jesus has described.

But notice he says, "I have not yet attained." Beware of those believers who say, "I don't need to read the Bible anymore. I don't need to pray. I've arrived. I've been a Christian a long time. And I'm 'under the spout where the glory comes out.' I'm just living in Canaan's land. I'm just in cruise-mode right now." It's to be our passion and our thirst and our hunger for more of God and to live righteously.

Beware of anything that dulls or deadens your appetite for God. Too much television can do that. Too much of other things that are good can be bad. Anything that dulls or deadens your appetite for God is a weight, not a wing. The Bible says to "lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us." Someone said, "If it's not a wing, it's a weight." There are things in my life and in your life that may not be sinful but is holding you back from maximum efficiency in seeking and serving the Lord.

In this Beatitude, "hunger and thirst" is actually in the present tense. So it's a continuous action. This hunger and thirst is to be ongoing, it's to be habitual, it's to be continuous. It's a life-long passion. You could actually render this, "Our hungering and thirsting." Don't let other things get in the way; be a hungering and thirsting Christian.

You do that by praying and feeding on God's Word. In 1 Peter 2:2, Peter says, "As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the Word, that you may grow thereby." So we need to pray, we need to read God's Word and we need to fellowship. Those are the big three; preachers are always harping on them. Read your Bible, pray and be in church and fellowship. Be connected with other believers. If you're hungering and thirsting after righteousness, those things will be part of your life.

In Matthew 6:33, I believe it summarizes what it means to hunger and thirst. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you." So what's to be the number one passion and goal of your life? God's kingdom, God's righteousness. Paul says, "I haven't yet attained, but I follow after. I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." Our prayer should be, "Lord, help me to seek first Your kingdom and Your righteousness."

Here is my third and last question: "What is the promise to those who hunger and thirst?" We've seen the righteousness: it's that living out a holy life; it's imparted righteousness. Then we've seen the hunger and thirst as a metaphor for intense desire. Now what's the promise? What will happen if I "hunger and thirst for righteousness"? Notice it in verse 6: "They shall be filled."

By the way, we get our word "fodder" from that word "filled." It's meant for cows eating fodder. It means to be completely full. Not full of cheddar-cheese popcorn, but in this text, it means to be full of righteousness. He fills us with His righteousness; He empowers us, He enables us to live a holy, godly life. Then our lives are satisfied. Some translations have, "They shall be satisfied."

As it is with all the Beatitudes, this is emphatic: "They shall be filled." It could have been translated, "They, and they only, shall be filled." So those who are hungry and thirsty after God's righteousness are happy or blessed. Sin leads to sadness, but holiness leads to happiness. You're not pursuing happiness; you're pursuing holiness. The by-product of holiness is happiness.

We get it all wrong: we try to find things that will make us happy, things that will bring us satisfaction, try to find people who will make us happy, relationships that will make us happy, but it doesn't work. We just end up empty. That's because you were made for God, you were made to know God, you were made for a relationship with God. If we would only put into practice Matthew 6:33, "seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness," He will take care of the rest. Happiness is the result, because God is the One Who fills the empty heart.

In Jeremiah 2:13, the Lord speaks to the people through the prophet, Jeremiah, and says, "For My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, and hewn themselves cisterns—broken cisterns that can hold no water." If you've ever toured the land of Israel, you'll see cisterns all over the place. They've been carved out of the limestone. The rains would come and they would collect the water. That's how they got their water supply. It would be like a big swimming pool filled with water.

So God said, "You've forsaken Me, and I'm the fountain of living water. I'm a perpetual, living stream. Then you roll up your sleeves, dig out this huge cistern but it's broken." The water fills up in the cistern, it has anticipation of bringing satisfaction, you look so excited, but all of a sudden you realize the cistern has a crack, and the water is leaking out. It's broken. All our cisterns, apart from God, are broken, they leak and they don't satisfy.

Why would we, like the people in Jeremiah's day, forsake God, a fountain of living water? Why would we hew out cisterns that could hold no water when we could come to God and drink? Remember in John 4 when Jesus met with the woman at the well in Samaria? Jesus sat on Jacob's well, and the woman came to draw water from the well. Jesus asked her for a drink and she was blown away. She asked, "How is it that you, being a Jew, ask me, a woman of Samaria, for a drink, for the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans?" In that dialogue, Jesus said, "If you only knew who I was, you would ask Me, and I would give you living water."

She still didn't understand and asked Him, "Where are you going to get this living water? This is a deep well, and you don't have a rope or a bucket." Jesus said, "The water that I will give will be a well springing up into everlasting life." Then Jesus revealed her sin, and she came to faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus actually said to her, "You can drink from the water in this well, and you will thirst again. But whoever drinks of the water that I will give him, there will be within him a perpetual well of water springing up into everlasting life." It's like having an artesian well within your soul. That's what a Christian has, by the way. They have an artesian well in their soul. They can drink that living water, and Jesus is that living water.

In Psalm 107:9, it says, "For He satisfies the longing soul, and fills the hungry soul with

goodness.” That’s so awesome. In Psalm 34:8, it says, “Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man who trusts in Him!” But you have to taste and see that God is good. In Luke 1:53 Mary, in her Magnificat, sang, “He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent away empty.” That’s really a summary of this Beatitude.

I think of the rich, young ruler, who came to Jesus, but it wasn’t born out of a sense of his sinfulness. The rich, young ruler asked, “Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus said, “You know the Commandments. Do this and this....” The man said, self-righteously, “I’ve done all that. It’s not a problem. I’ve done them since I was young. I’ve gone to church my whole life. I’ve been baptized. My parents are Christians. I’m a Christian.” I hear this all the time.

The rich, young ruler asked, “What do I still lack?” He recognized an emptiness in his soul. So Jesus said, “Sell everything you have, give it to the poor, come follow Me and you’ll have riches in heaven.” Jesus wasn’t telling everyone who follows Him to sell everything they have, so don’t freak out. But He did tell it to this rich, young ruler, because he had made his things a god.

Then the Bible says that this young man turned and walked sorrowfully away. That’s when Jesus turned to His disciples and said, “Look at how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. It’s easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to come into the kingdom.” Why? Because you have to humble yourself to get into the kingdom. You have to see yourself as spiritually poor, you have to mourn and you have to be broken in meekness and humility to God. Then you have to hunger and thirst after righteousness. These are the characteristics of those who live in the kingdom.

What a contrast a Christian is to the prodigal son, who ran away and wasted his substance on riotous living. When he became hungry—this was a physical hunger, but it also was a spiritual hunger—he said, “How many hired servants of my father have bread while I perish with hunger?! I will go back to my father and say, ‘Father, I’ve sinned against God and before you. I’m no longer worthy to be called your son. Just make me one of your hired servants.’” On the son’s way back, when he was a great way off, his father saw him and ran to him, had compassion on him and smothered him with kisses. He put shoes on him, a ring on his finger and a robe on him. They killed the fatted calf and began to make merry. The father said, “My son, who was lost, is found! Who was dead is alive!” Joy came, because there was real thirsting and hungering to be back in the father’s house. That’s what it means to be hungry and thirsty before God.

Bernard of Clairvaux said these words, and they’ve been put into a beautiful hymn:

“We taste Thee, O Thou living bread,

And long to feast upon Thee still;

We drink of Thee, the Fountainhead,

And thirst our souls From Thee to fill.”

In John 7:37-38, Jesus, on the last day of the great day of the feast, stood and said, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink....Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.” Then John said, “This He spoke concerning the Spirit...for the Holy Spirit was not yet given.”

If you're thirsty today, if you're hungry today, if your life is empty today, there is a fountain that will not run dry. Jesus said, “I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever.” He said, “Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst.”

Could it be that you've been eating wrong things or feeding on wrong things, and you've lost your appetite for the things of God? Then why not humble your heart before God today? Ask God to give you a hungry heart for righteousness.

Let's pray.