

“HUNGERING FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS”

**I. Introduction**

- A. In this sermon series, we have said that the Beatitudes serve as a summary of Christian character.
  - 1. Jesus is giving us a picture of what a Christian looks like.
  - 2. And the qualities that he describes here are not qualities that we produce by our own efforts.
  - 3. They are blessings bestowed upon us by God.
  - 4. We have also said that there is a logical sequence or progression to the Beatitudes.
  - 5. This means the longing for righteousness that Jesus describes in verse 6 is the product of the things that he mentions in verses 3, 4, and 5.
  - 6. Those who admit their poverty of spirit not only mourn over it and relate to others in light of it; they also long to be righteous.
- B. As we study this fourth Beatitude tonight, I want to look at it in three parts.
  - 1. First, we will consider what Jesus means when he speaks of righteousness.
  - 2. Second, we will explore what it means to hunger and thirst for this righteousness.
  - 3. And third, we will reflect upon how this longing for righteousness will be satisfied.

**II. What Is Righteousness?**

- A. What does Jesus mean by the word “righteousness” here?
1. The best place to begin when it comes to questions like this is to look at how the word is used elsewhere in the book.
  2. Jesus speaks of righteousness in several other places in the Sermon on the Mount.
  3. In the final Beatitude he says, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake.”
  4. In chapter 5:20 he says, “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”
  5. In chapter 6:1 he says, “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.”
  6. And in chapter 6:33 he says, “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.”
- B. These passages help us to understand what kind of righteousness Jesus is talking about here.
1. While it is a righteousness that is exhibited in the life of the Christian, it is not just a matter of outwardly performing certain duties.
  2. It has to be deeper than that.
  3. It has to be a righteousness of the heart.
  4. Moreover, it is not a righteousness that is produced by human effort but the righteousness that belongs to God.
  5. True righteousness cannot be boiled down to a simple list of dos and don’ts, although that is certainly an element of it.

6. True righteousness is bound up with the very being of God.
7. This is something that Jesus demonstrates so powerfully in his teaching on the law, especially when it is compared to the Pharisees' teaching on the law.
8. As Geerhardus Vos explains, "The law in the hands of Jesus becomes alive with God's own personality." [*Grace and Glory*, 45]

C. Righteousness is an attribute of God.

1. The fact that God created mankind in his image means that he intends for his righteousness to be reflected in us.
2. But in our fallen state, we cannot even begin to realize this great end for which we were created.
3. This is why Paul says in Philippians 3 that he does not want to have "a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith." (v. 9)
4. It is true that Paul is talking about righteousness in a legal sense in that verse.
5. He is talking about the righteous standing that believers have in God's sight through the grace of justification.
6. As we will see in just a moment, this is not the primary thing that Jesus has in view when he speaks of righteousness in Matthew 5:6.
7. Nevertheless, it would be a colossal mistake to separate the righteousness of justification from what Jesus is talking about here.
8. Even though Jesus' focus is upon righteousness as it pertains to sanctification, we have to remember that sanctification can never be separated from justification.

9. The only people who are being made righteous in Christ are those who have been counted righteous through faith in Christ.
  10. The person who thinks that he can seek righteousness apart from the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ is someone who has absolutely no idea of what true righteousness is.
- D. Jesus' focus in this verse is upon personal righteousness, the righteous character that God creates in the lives of his people.
1. This is made clear by the fact that this righteousness is something that the Christian keeps on hungering and thirsting for.
  2. It is not something that he already possesses.
  3. As far as justification is concerned, we are counted righteous the moment we place our faith in Christ.
  4. That is something that never changes, even though our assurance of it can change.
  5. But the righteousness of sanctification is something that does change in the life of the believer.
  6. As our Shorter Catechism puts it, "Sanctification is the work of God's free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness." [WSC 35]
  7. This is the primary thing that Jesus has in mind in this Beatitude.
  8. He is telling us that one of the traits that is found in every Christian is the longing to be truly and completely righteous.

### III. Longing for Righteousness

- A. This brings us to our second question: what does it mean to hunger and thirst for righteousness?
1. What does this longing look like?
  2. We gain insight into this by considering the image that Jesus gives us here.
  3. He uses the experience of being hungry and thirsty.
  4. These are elemental desires.
  5. If our physical hunger and thirst are left unsatisfied, we will die.
  6. In the words of Geerhardus Vos, "To hunger and thirst after a thing means the recognition that without that thing there can be no life." [49]
  7. When a man is truly hungry or thirsty, that desire becomes the controlling factor in his life.
  8. Everything else pales in comparison with the need to satisfy that desire.
- B. By employing this image, Jesus is telling us that without righteousness, there can be no life for us.
1. The pursuit of righteousness is not something that is optional for the Christian.
  2. It is absolutely necessary.
  3. This is why the writer of Hebrews instructs us to "Strive for...the holiness without which no one will see the Lord." (Hebrews 12:14)
  4. Of course, it is crucial that we not misunderstand this.

5. This does not in any way contradict what the Bible says about justification.
  6. Our personal righteousness is never the basis of God's acceptance of us.
  7. The basis of that acceptance is always the righteousness of Christ, imputed to us by faith.
  8. That being said, those who have justifying faith in Christ will produce the fruit of faith in their lives.
  9. Though your pursuit of righteousness will always be imperfect in this life, it is necessary because it stands as the evidence of your justification.
- C. The hunger and thirst that Jesus is talking about in this Beatitude is the desire to be entirely free from sin.
1. Every Christian has this desire because we know that sin is an offense against the God whom we love, the God who first loved us.
  2. This is not to say that we always act in accordance with this desire.
  3. On the contrary, our lives are characterized by the same struggle that Paul describes in Romans 7 when he says "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." (v. 15)
  4. That struggle is always there, but because we have been made alive in Christ, we truly do want to be set free from sin's power.
  5. We long to be free from having the desire to sin.
  6. We want to be holy, to be perfectly conformed to the likeness of Christ.

7. Try to imagine for a moment what that will be like.
  8. Imagine what it will be like in the state of glory: to not be able to sin, to not even want to sin, to always and only do what is pleasing to God.
  9. If that sounds absolutely wonderful to you, then you can take that as a confirmation that you have the hunger and thirst that Jesus is speaking of in this passage.
- D. It is good for us to hunger and thirst for righteousness.
1. It is part of Jesus' summary of Christian character.
  2. But there is one aspect of this that so easily trips us up.
  3. We often want to be righteous for the wrong reasons.
  4. We often want to be set free the power and influence that sin has in our lives because of our pride.
  5. We are ashamed of the ways in which we continue to struggle with sin.
  6. We want to be able to present ourselves as those who are victorious over sin.
  7. But when that is our motivation, we want to take credit for the righteousness that we do see in our lives.
  8. This is why we need to remember that the proper motivation in the pursuit of righteousness is a grateful desire to see God glorified in your life, not a desire to have other people be impressed at how godly you are.
- E. As far as the practical aspects of pursuing righteousness, Martin Lloyd-Jones offers some wise counsel in his *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*.

1. First, we need to avoid things that are opposed to righteousness.
  2. This should go without saying, but unfortunately it is something that is often ignored.
  3. There are things that are opposed to righteousness, and the Christian should not take part in such things.
  4. Lloyd-Jones also says that we need to be careful even of things which may be legitimate but which, if improperly used, will dull our spiritual appetite.
  5. He writes, "There are so many things that I cannot condemn in and of themselves. But if I find I spend too much of my time with them, and that somehow I want God and spiritual things less and less, then, if I am hungering and thirsting after righteousness, I shall avoid them." [90]
  6. Lastly, Lloyd-Jones says that we need to seek righteousness where it is found: in Christ himself.
  7. This means we need to make diligent use of the outward and ordinary means through which Christ communicates himself and his benefits to us.
  8. In Lloyd-Jones' words, "The man who really wants [this righteousness] says, 'I cannot afford to lose any opportunity; wherever this is being talked about I want to be there.'" [91]
- F. We should also note that while Jesus' emphasis here is on personal righteousness, it certainly has an application to what might be called social righteousness.
1. Christians should have a desire to see righteousness prevail in this world.
  2. This is what we are asking when we pray, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."



3. Our hunger for righteousness should cause us to promote what is right and just and good in our society.
  4. But even more than that, it should motivate us to point our non-Christian neighbors to Jesus Christ.
  5. All the supposed righteousness of this world will stand condemned on the day when it is subjected to God's judgment.
  6. This is why Peter says that "according to [God's] promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells." (2 Pet. 3:13)
- G. One final thing to note about this hunger and thirst for righteousness is that it is a perpetual desire in the life of the Christian.
1. We look forward to the day when we will be perfectly righteous, but we will never attain to that in this life.
  2. We long for the day when God's will will be done on earth as it is in heaven, but we cannot bring that about.
  3. For as long as we live in this world, we will be hungering and thirsting for righteousness.

#### **IV. The Promise of Satisfaction**

- A. This brings us to the last point that we are going to consider in this sermon: Jesus' promise that our hunger and thirst for righteousness will one day be satisfied.
1. God did not give us this longing in order to leave it unsatisfied.
  2. In the words of Psalm 107, "he satisfies the longing soul, and the hungry soul he fills with good things." (Psalm 107:9)

3. God gave you a hunger for righteousness because he intends to give you the thing for which you hunger.
4. Listen to these words from Geerhardus Vos: “the Lord here assures the hungry and thirsty ones, that they shall be satisfied. Every instinctive desire, when normal, carries in itself the knowledge that there is that which can satisfy it... If this be true in the natural world, it is equally true in the sphere of redemption... He that gave the thirst likewise provides the water... It is not the will of our Heavenly Father that any longing in our hearts, prompted by Himself, and therefore sincerely seeking Him, shall perish unsatisfied. A satisfying righteousness therefore must be provided for the people of God. And it must be provided outside of us. To eat means to be nourished from without. Since the sinner is devoid of all righteousness, it is self-evident, that the source of his supply must be sought beyond the confines of his own evil and empty nature.” [53-55]

B. You and I don't have any righteousness of our own.

1. We cannot produce it by any amount of effort.
2. But we can take comfort in knowing that Jesus Christ is the righteous One.
3. And when your faith is in him, you have God's promise that in Christ you will be made the righteousness of God.
4. As John says in his first epistle, on the last day, “when [Christ] appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.” (1 John 3:2)