

A Blessed Yearning for Righteousness

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Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

Matthew 5:6

Having considered the inner and abiding disposition of the Christian, we will now examine the core trait of the citizens of God's kingdom: hungering and thirsting after righteousness.

Here Christ addresses the ongoing and repeated spiritual exercise of the true believer who knows himself to be poor in spirit, mourns over this poverty, and is meek. Such experiential awareness will issue forth in a blessed yearning for righteousness. As we examine this core trait of the Christian, we will consider the object of this yearning, its nature, and its outcome.

The Object of Yearning: Righteousness

This fourth beatitude is the linchpin in the initial seven beatitudes. To use an analogy, it is the axle around which the entire wheel of Christian experience revolves. All the other beatitudes are connected to this central beatitude. The inward disposition delineated in the first three beatitudes will cause us to hunger and thirst after righteousness, and when we are filled to overflowing with righteousness, it will spill over into our lives and cause us to be merciful, pure in heart, and peacemakers.

As has already been stated, the order in which Christ pronounces the Beatitudes is not arbitrary. Each beatitude presumes the previous one and anticipates the next. Thus, the hungering and thirsting that Jesus refers to is not randomly inserted. Those who hunger and thirst after righteousness know why they are yearning for it. The Spirit of God so works in the hearts of Christians that such yearning becomes their only option. They who are poor in spirit, who mourn, and who are meek have learned intellectually and experientially that they need exactly the righteousness that Christ is speaking of.

What is Christ referring to when He speaks of righteousness? The word *righteousness* readily yields its own meaning. In English, righteousness simply means "that which is right." Thus, Christ is saying, "Blessed are they who yearn after that which is right."

By what standard do we determine what is right or not? What is righteousness or unrighteousness? The Bible gives us only one standard: God's holy law. The moral law defines for us what is right in God's sight. Whatever contradicts that law is unrighteous. Since God is a righteous God, He has given us a righteous standard.

When they were first created, Adam and Eve lived in perfect harmony with the law of God written on their hearts. In other words, everything about them was right. They had a right relationship with God that completely conformed to His will for them. As a result of that right relationship, they also live a right life—one in perfect conformity to their Creator's revealed will. Their chief desire was to live righteously, thereby pleasing their Maker.

Since Adam and Eve had a right relationship with God and lived a right life, they were righteous in the double sense of the word. Everything about them was right, and because they were holy and sinless, they were completely compatible with a holy and righteous God. In our computer-driven society, the word *compatibility* is used frequently. We all understand that a computer and its peripheral devices must be compatible for them to function properly. Thus, if your printer is incompatible with your computer, your printer will not work. By way of analogy,

we can say that when God created us in Adam, we were fully compatible with Him. But as a result of our deep fall, everything about us has become unrighteous. Consequently, we no longer have a proper or righteous relationship with our Creator. By nature, we live apart from God, for in Adam we divorced ourselves from Him.

As a result of that broken relationship, we no longer live righteously. Every aspect of our lives now contradicts the perfect standard of God's law. As fallen creatures, we are now incompatible with God. Adam and Eve, and all their posterity, were expelled from the sacred territory of the garden of Eden because a holy and righteous God cannot tolerate an unrighteous creature in His presence.

The amazing truth of the gospel, however, is that God has provided unrighteous sinners with a righteousness by which we can again become acceptable in His sight. By nature we are just as blind to that as the Pharisee who stood in the front of the temple praising himself, thoroughly impressed with his own righteousness and totally ignorant of how abominable he was in God's sight. We need to understand that God can be satisfied only with perfection. In other words, God's requirement of us has not changed. He requires perfect, flawless righteousness. Anything less than that is unacceptable. That is why Jesus said, "Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:20). Unless we are perfectly and flawlessly righteous, God can neither accept us, receive us, nor embrace us.

The Holy Spirit's ministry is to confront us with our lack of such flawless righteousness. In essence, Christ is saying, "All spiritual life begins with the awareness of one's spiritual poverty, for blessed are the poor in spirit." We will never desire the righteousness that God provides in His only begotten Son unless we are thoroughly convinced in our heart that we completely lack that righteousness. We must understand what Isaiah meant when he said, "But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags" (Isa. 64:6).

That's a strong statement. Isaiah is saying that God views our righteousness as filthy rags—as a menstrual cloth. In other words, our very best works are unacceptable to God. The poor publican in the parable—who dared not come to the front of the temple, who dared not lift up his eye, and who smote on his breast—was aware of his bankruptcy before God. Such experiential awareness of one's spiritual poverty is the work of the Holy Spirit, for we will never be inclined naturally to acknowledge this. We may casually agree with the fact that we are sinners, but we will never acknowledge that we have absolutely nothing that measures up to God's standard of perfect righteousness.

It should be noted again that all the spiritual attributes articulated in the Beatitudes are never found in the natural man. They will never be components of one's natural disposition. These seven marks will manifest themselves only as a result of the marvelous work of the Holy Spirit. Only His irresistible and transforming ministry will cause a sinner to acknowledge that he is bankrupt, that all he has is unrighteousness. That experiential awareness will cause the citizens of God's kingdom to hunger and thirst after the righteousness He has provided in His only begotten Son.

Why do Christians yearn for that righteousness? This desire proceeds from God shedding abroad His love into our hearts. From that moment on, our hearts will yearn after God. How we will then grieve over the fact that our sin separates us from God! That sorrowful awareness will cause us to yearn for a righteousness that will bring us back into a right relationship with God—a righteousness that will so restore us that we again begin to live a right life unto God. That is the

righteousness God unveils for us in His Word and in the gospel, setting before us and offering to us the righteousness of His only begotten Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

During His sojourn on earth, Jesus merited a perfect righteousness by living a life of flawless obedience to the law of God. His perfect obedience was completely acceptable to His Father. However, He also accomplished something else. By His death on the cross, He paid the full penalty for our breaking of the law, thereby fully satisfying the claims of God's offended justice and paving the way for full reconciliation with Him. He merited that righteousness by living a life we, as sinners, never could have lived and by dying a death that we never could have died. J. C. Ryle, a well-known British preacher, said, "Christ has saved us by His doing and by His dying." By His doing and His dying, Christ has merited a perfect and a flawless righteousness that is fully acceptable to His Father. Thus, when He cried out, "It is finished," His Father immediately rent the veil, thereby demonstrating that He is completely pleased with the finished work of His beloved Son.

In the gospel, God freely and unconditionally offers to us His Son and His flawless righteousness—the righteousness He demands and we cannot produce—and promises that upon believing in His only begotten Son He will impute to us that flawless righteousness. That simply means that He will credit Christ's righteousness to our bankrupt sinner's account. On the basis of that imputed righteousness, the righteous God will declare the believing sinner righteous—not because he has any righteousness of his own, but rather because God has graciously bestowed on him the righteousness He demands!

Dear reader, have you learned to understand that you need that divinely provided righteousness and that you need such a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ? By nature we have no need of such a Christ. The gospel offends the natural man, for it plainly declares that before God we are spiritually bankrupt and void of all righteousness.

However, against that background, the gospel also reveals that Jesus Christ provides the perfect righteousness needed to have a right relationship with God. The Lord Jesus Christ will therefore become so precious to sinners. When we have been emptied of all that is of ourselves, when we are confronted with the ugly reality of our sin, and when the Spirit confronts us with the reality that we cannot make things right with God, how exceedingly precious the Lord Jesus Christ will then become! The Lord therefore describes the citizens of His kingdom as those who hunger and thirst after *that* righteousness.

The Nature of the Yearning: Hungering and Thirsting

We will now consider the nature of this yearning. Christ again uses carefully chosen words to describe this desire as hungering and thirsting. Everyone understands these words. We have all been so hungry that we could hardly wait to eat, and we have all been so thirsty—especially on a hot summer day—that we could hardly wait to get into the house to get something to drink.

We all recognize hunger and thirst as basic human desires that must be satisfied. We cannot permanently live with hunger. Ultimately, it will become so intense that we will do whatever it takes to find something to satisfy it. In the Netherlands, during the hunger winter of 1944 and 1945, people were so hungry that they would eat flower bulbs and go to soup kitchens to secure a very watered-down version of soup. Children would be waiting for empty soup barrels to be thrown out the door, and they would then literally dive into those barrels to lick its walls clean. That's how hungry they were! Hunger is a desire that must be satisfied.

The same is true for thirst. When our throat becomes parched, we will do anything to quench that thirst. We cannot live without these basic desires being satisfied. God obviously

created our bodies in such a way that we will desire that which we need to live. In other words, hungering and thirsting belong to the most essential and fundamental desires of our existence. Every single day we will take the necessary steps to satisfy our hunger and thirst.

Christ uses this analogy to illustrate the spiritual yearning expressed in this beatitude. When Jesus declares that the people of God's kingdom will yearn after Him and His righteousness, their desire will be such that they cannot be satisfied unless that yearning is satisfied. In other words, true believers cannot be satisfied with anything other than the righteousness that they yearn for so intensely. They cannot be satisfied unless they acquire a righteousness that brings them into a right and reconciled relationship with God and equips them to begin living a life that is pleasing to Him.

As is true in the natural realm, one cannot just pretend to be spiritually hungry and thirsty. Those desires are real. One can tell whether people are genuinely hungry and thirsty. Thus, Christ teaches here that this yearning after righteousness is not merely an intellectual exercise. Rather, He is saying that this yearning is deeply experiential—something that becomes very real to the citizens of God's kingdom.

That desire ultimately issues forth from a true Christian yearning after the living God Himself. The psalmist therefore said, "As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God" (Ps. 42:1). That yearning for reconciliation with God makes a believer so hungry and thirsty for the righteousness found in the Lord Jesus Christ. Such yearning is expressed in the words of the Dutch poet Jacob Groenewegen: "Give me Jesus, or else I die." Nothing can satisfy a living soul except Jesus Christ and His righteousness.

Reader, do you recognize yourself in this? The circumstances of your conversion may be as unique as those of Lydia and the jailor, or of Timothy and Paul. However, all believers will have this in common: a deep yearning for Christ Himself. Jesus expressed this clearly in John 6:45: "Every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto me." Jesus says that we can know whether we have been taught by His Father when we, by faith, come to Him. Sinners taught by the Father will be irresistibly drawn to Christ and His righteousness.

The Holy Spirit will achieve this by stripping us of our self-made righteousness. He will so confront us with our spiritual poverty that the Lord Jesus Christ will become irresistible to our soul. The Spirit will make Jesus irresistibly attractive so that we cannot stay away from Him; our whole being will yearn after Him and His flawless righteousness. The believer will understand experientially that in Christ he can be reconciled to God and restored into His favor. In Him alone can God's image be restored again in his life. Only in Him will he be equipped to begin living a life that is pleasing to God.

We need to recognize that the true believer also yearns for the latter. He will desire not only to have a right relationship with God but also to live a life that is pleasing to Him—a righteous life. Using theological terms, we could put it this way: in essence Christ is saying that the blessed will hunger and thirst after Him for their justification and sanctification—for imputed and imparted righteousness. Both foundational benefits of redemption are wrapped up in the word *righteousness* as it used here by Christ. These benefits are inseparable; one will never occur without the other. True Christians yearn for both.

This is expressed in Romans 7. Here the apostle Paul expressed his spiritual grief, for in the innermost recess of his being he wished to obey God's law—not to earn God's favor but rather as an expression of love. Yet it grieved him that he found himself coming short of what the law requires. Therefore he groaned within himself and made the painful confession that in his

flesh dwelt no good thing. However, he simultaneously confessed that the delight of his inner man was to obey God's revealed will.

It is an essential mark of spiritual life that the true Christian longs not only to be in Christ and reconciled to God but also to be like Christ. Simply stated, those who come to Christ will also desire to become like Him. Coming to and becoming like Christ belong inseparably together. It is the Christian's abiding desire to become like Christ, having been predestined to be conformed to the image of God's Son (Rom. 8:29).

Dear reader, if such hungering and thirsting is foreign to you, you will be lacking the most fundamental mark of true spiritual life. Can you lay your heart bare before God and say, "Lord, Thou knowest all things, Thou knowest that in the deepest recesses of my soul, my heart cries out after Thee; Thou knowest that I desire to be righteous in Thy sight; Thou knowest how much I need Thy Son and His righteousness; Thou knowest how precious Thy Son has become to me"? A true believer ultimately cannot be satisfied with anything but Christ Himself. For the true believer, Christ becomes, and increasingly will be, his all and in all. That is the full satisfaction Christ promises in this beatitude to such hungry and thirsty souls.

The Outcome of This Spiritual Yearning: Full Satisfaction

"And they shall be filled." The grammatical construction implies that the experience of being filled proceeds from a source outside of ourselves. This is not a self-manufactured satisfaction. The Spirit of God makes and keeps believers hungry and thirsty for Christ and His righteousness.

Again, the choice of vocabulary speaks volumes: "They shall be filled." The literal rendering would be that they shall be filled to overflowing. The analogy would be to take a glass and let the water run till it gushes over. That is the sort of filling that Christ promises to the hungering and thirsting citizens of His kingdom—namely, that they shall be filled to overflowing.

This is consistent with what Christ says elsewhere: "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly" (John 10:10). This agrees with the language of Psalm 132:15: "I will abundantly bless her provision: I will satisfy her poor with bread." The very nature of God is to bless His people to overflowing, for, as the Belgic Confession so beautifully states in article 1, He is an overflowing Fountain of good. Thus, any notion that God only gives His people the bare minimum, giving them a crumb now and then, entirely contradicts the Word of God as well as His very nature.

Parents who greatly love their children want to bless them. They want to help their children to the utmost of their ability and will do everything in their power to meet their children's needs. This is infinitely more true in the spiritual realm. The same God who will strip us of all our own righteousness and self-confidence desires to lead us to His only begotten Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, so that we might embrace Him by faith. Embracing His Son by faith so pleases the Father that He will respond by filling the believer to overflowing.

In Psalm 107:9 we read, "For he satisfieth the longing soul, and filleth the hungry soul with goodness," and in Jeremiah 31:14 the Lord says, "And I will satiate the soul of the priests with fatness, and my people shall be satisfied with my goodness." There is nothing that pleases God more than when a sinner finds his joy and satisfaction in His only begotten Son. He is greatly pleased and honored when He hears the echo of His own Word when we say, "O heavenly Father, I too, I am well pleased with Thy only begotten son."

The true Christian will therefore be unable to find real satisfaction apart from Christ. The Holy Spirit will see to it that we cannot find any peace except in Him. Therefore, if we secretly

trust or look for comfort in something other than Christ, He will take it away from us in order to make us rest in Him alone. Christ alone can satisfy the living soul. Once we experience something of that satisfaction, of being filled to overflowing, nothing else will ever be able to satisfy us again.

This hungering and thirsting is a lifelong experience—as are all the Beatitudes. There is again an obvious analogy in the natural realm. Just because we may have had a phenomenal meal one day does not mean that we will not eat the next day. This is consistent with how God made us. Although we find perfect satisfaction in a meal one day, we will hunger and thirst again the next day. Likewise, the life of a believer consists of an ongoing hungering and thirsting after Christ, an ongoing fleeing to Him, an ongoing coming to Him, and an ongoing and repeated experience of those spiritual desires being satisfied only in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Just as one good meal sets the stage for the next, likewise the more I taste experientially who Christ is, the more I will begin to experience how precious He is, the more I will yearn for Him, and the more I will desire to grow in my knowledge of Him. The apostle Paul, a man who had such an extraordinary knowledge of Christ, yearned for this: “that I may know him, and the power of his resurrection” (Phil. 3:10).

Dear reader, do you recognize yourself in this fundamental mark of the true Christian—this core trait of spiritual life? Does your spiritual life consist chiefly of hungering and thirsting after Christ and His righteousness? If brutal honesty with yourself leads you to the conclusion that such hungering and thirsting does not yet describe you, I urge you to seek Christ, who, even today, by way of the gospel, offers you the righteousness you need in order to be reconciled to God. Christ is willing and ready to receive the vilest sinner, and He has promised that if you come to Him, you will not be cast out. He tells us in the gospel that even for you there is a perfect robe of righteousness!

Do not be like that man who, after being freely offered the king’s robe, entered the wedding feast dressed in his own garment. He placed himself at the table with the guests of the king, who spotted him immediately, and the man was cast out (Matt. 22:11–13).

Dear friend, you cannot appear before God dressed in your own righteousness. God will accept only Christ’s righteousness when you and I appear before Him. He freely offers you that robe of righteousness today! He promises you in the gospel that if you believe in His Son and trust in Him, the righteousness He has merited will become yours and will render you acceptable in God’s sight.

Dear believer, you who hunger and thirst after Christ and His righteousness, the day is coming when the promise of this beatitude will be fulfilled to perfection. You will then be filled to overflowing in a manner that you have never experienced in this life. It will be a day of which we read, “They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; . . . For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters” (Rev. 7:16–17).

That is the blessed future that awaits all who hunger and thirst after Christ in His righteousness! There will come a day of perfect and everlasting satisfaction. Yet, amazingly, when that day of full consummation arrives, we are told that the Lamb will ever feed His redeemed people and lead them “unto living fountains of waters.” He will ever be our complete and everlasting satisfaction, which is why Jesus said, “I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst” (John 6:35).