Matthew 5:6
Spiritual Hunger: The Key to Soul Satisfaction

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"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness," but some inspired passages are more profitable than others.

"Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God," but some words that proceed from the mouth of God are more nurturing and edifying than others.

For example, the genealogies and the census numbers and the tribal land boundaries are a part of the inspired Word of God, and they have their purpose. There is profit in studying them, and we should not neglect them. Yet they are not among the richest, the meatiest, the most edifying portions of Scripture.

The Beatitudes, however, are. They are among the choicest of the choice, the best of the best, the cream of the crop. The Beatitudes are the opening words of a sermon preached by our Lord Jesus Christ about the key to true blessedness or happiness. The One who preached this sermon is God's supreme revelation of Himself to humanity. "God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, ... who [is] the

brightness of His glory and the express image of His person...” When Jesus preaches, we should listen. And the opening subject of this sermon is one which greatly interests us all. What could be more profitable and edifying than our Savior's own explanation of the key to blessedness, the key to happiness, the key to enjoying life in the deepest, most significant sense? And that is what we find in the Beatitudes.

Today we will be examining the fourth Beatitude: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.” I will begin by pointing out how this beatitude fits into the overall flow of thought. There is a logical progression of thought in the beatitudes, and we need to examine the way each of the beatitudes fits into this progression. All of the beatitudes are simply descriptions of the true Christian, descriptions of the character and experience which characterize those who are truly born again. The fourth beatitude is the hinge beatitude which takes us from the negative descriptions of spiritual need to the positive descriptions of spiritual fulfillment. The first three beatitudes teach that the Christian as a result of the new birth comes to recognize His great spiritual need.

Blessed are the poor in spirit; that is, blessed are those who recognize their spiritual poverty and bankruptcy; those who have been delivered from pride and have given up on any hope of saving themselves or earning God's favor or meriting heaven. These are blessed because they alone are going to recognize Christ as the Pearl of Great Price and come to Him for spiritual riches.

Blessed are those who mourn; that is, blessed are those who have been delivered from hardened hearts and calloused consciences and self-deception and thus are inwardly miserable, pained and distressed that they have sinned against a holy God. These are blessed because they alone are going to come to the Great Physician for healing and comfort.

Blessed are the meek; that is, blessed those who recognize their own spiritual impotency and inability; those who recognize that apart from Christ, they are spiritually dead and in bondage to Satan. These are blessed because they alone are going to come to the conquering Christ as their spiritual strength and shield.

Now that brings us to the fourth beatitude which both summarizes all that has gone before and foretells what is to come. That is why I call it the “hinge beatitude.” These first three beatitudes are summarized by the statement, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness.” Hunger and thirst are here metaphors for our humble recognition of spiritual need.

And the statement “for they shall be filled” foretells the beatitudes which will follow. The beatitudes which follow are the positive beatitudes which describe how Christ fulfills those spiritual needs and transforms us into His image. We come to Christ, and we become the merciful, the pure in heart and the peacemakers. And as our Christ-like character increasingly comes to characterize the life we live, we will increasingly have Christ-like experiences. We will be privileged to suffer persecution for the sake of the kingdom of God.

We've looked at how the fourth beatitude fits into the flow of thought as the hinge beatitude that goes from the experience of spiritual hunger to the experience of spiritual fulfillment. Now I want to examine the beatitude itself, and I will begin by pointing out what the beatitude does not say. The fourth beatitude does not say, Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after happiness, for they shall be filled. The truly blessed or happy people are not those who hunger and thirst for happiness. True happiness is an illusive goal that we can never obtain by directly seeking it.

Here is where many make a most basic mistake. Apart from Christ, we have an inner void, an inner pain, an inner sense that something is lacking, that something is wrong in a most basic sense. Many people try to fill that void and deaden that pain with pleasurable experiences and feelings. This pleasure mania may appear to work for a time, but it does not satisfy in the long run. These people are like someone who is addicted to pain pills but refuses to see a doctor about the cancer that is consuming his body. He wants treatment for the pain but not for the cancer that is causing it. All he is concerned about is the symptom and not the disease. He does not want even to acknowledge that the disease exists. Pain pills may help for a time but they are no real and lasting solution.

To change the illustration, I am reminded of those computer generated pictures that were all the rage a few years ago. If you focussed directly upon the picture, all you saw was an unintelligible jumble of colors and shapes. But if you could discipline yourself to focus beyond the picture, suddenly the picture's image would jump out at you in three dimensional

splendor. That is the way it is with happiness. We can never obtain it by focussing upon it. We have to focus on something beyond happiness, and then we obtain it. The way to true happiness is to seek first not happiness but the kingdom of God and His righteousness.

Well, if that is the case, what is this righteousness we are supposed to seek as the key to obtaining happiness? Righteousness basically means that which is right or just as reflected in God's nature and defined by God's moral law. In order to be truly happy, we are going to have to obtain a legal standing of righteousness before God. Paul talks about this in Romans 4:5-8:

5 But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness,
6 just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works:
7 "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered;
8 Blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall not impute sin."

Jesus spoke about blessedness and righteousness, and Paul also combines those two concepts in this passage. Paul is here talking about the legal standing of perfect righteousness which God imputes to us the moment we believe in Jesus. We have broken God's law, and Paul refers to us as ungodly. Yet when we believe in Jesus, God justifies us or proclaims that our legal standing before Him is one of perfect righteousness, one of total

conformity with the law of God. This is something we obtain not through our own imperfect works but through the perfect work of Jesus. Jesus worked in a twofold sense to obtain for His people this perfect legal standing before God. First, Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty due to us for our sins. Second, Jesus lived a perfect life, and He imputes to His people His own legal record of a life perfectly lived. So the moment we enter into a faith relationship with Jesus, trusting Him alone for our salvation, we are cleansed by His blood and clothed in His righteousness. This is the doctrine of justification.

Now this is included in what Jesus was talking about in this beatitude because justification is key to our happiness. Romans 5:1 says,

1 Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ...

Being at peace with God, reconciled with God, is essential to genuine happiness. So I believe a desire for justification is included when Jesus said, “Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness.” But Jesus also meant more than that. Jesus was referring not only to the legal standing which He imputes to His people but also to the new life which He imparts to His people. Jesus was talking not only about legal forgiveness for sin but also about practical deliverance from sin.

I think we can see this from how Christ uses the word righteousness in Matthew 5:20 a little further down in the sermon on the mount:

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.

Here Christ was referring to righteousness not as a legal standing but as a standard of living. Christ in the sermon on the mount explains many of the failings of the scribes and Pharisees. They sometimes tried to avoid the requirements of the law through technicalities. When they did keep the law, they sometimes kept the letter of the law but not the spirit of the law. And their purpose was not to please God but to receive praise from men. Jesus is here saying that those who are truly citizens of God's kingdom will do better than that. Jesus says, "... unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven."

Now Jesus is not here teaching that we live a righteous life in order to earn or merit our salvation. Jesus is not here explaining how we are saved. He is merely described the life style of the person who has experienced the transforming grace of salvation. When Jesus saves someone, He not only gives that person a perfect legal standing before God, He also delivers him from the power of sin. Sin no longer dominates his life. Jesus writes the law of God on his heart in the sense of making obedience to God's law his desire and aspiration in life. The Christian still struggles with temptation. The Christian still sins on a daily basis. But sin no longer dominates his life; Jesus does. Jesus is the new Lord of His life.

And Jesus will complete his work of deliverance when He returns. Our souls will be made perfect in holiness, and our bodies will be freed from sin and the curse. Sin will no longer be a part of our experience.

In this beatitude, Jesus is saying that the true Christian will desire this. He will desire not only to have a perfect legal standing before God but also a progressive deliverance from his sinful ways in this life. He will not be like Lot's wife who when delivered from Sodom, left reluctantly and lingered because her heart was still in the city. The true Christians wants to be delivered from sin, and he longs one day to hear Jesus say to him regarding his life, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

We have looked at the relationship of the fourth beatitude to those before it and after it. We have seen that the blessed person seeks not happiness but righteousness. We have looked at what this righteousness is. Lastly, I want to consider what it means to hunger and to thirst. I think we have a good illustration of this in the parable of the prodigal son. The prodigal son, as you know, asked his father for his portion of his inheritance. He then went to a far country and spent his inheritance on prodigal living; that is, wild, reckless living. Then he ran out of money, and a famine came. He got a job and we read that at that point in his life, “he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate.” But then he reached the point where he was perishing with hunger. At that point, he decided to return to his father and seek forgiveness.

We see here three stages in his experience. First, he was engaged in wild living. People are not hungering and thirsting after righteousness when they are engaged in the pursuit of pleasure and unconcerned about the things of God.

Second, he was hungry and in need, but “he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate.” Similarly, people come to a sense of their guilt and their spiritual need, but they are still satisfied with the filthy rags of their own righteousness. They still have some hope of saving themselves. They are not then hungering and thirsting after righteousness.

Then the prodigal son was perishing with hunger. He was starving. He saw that he had no hope except to return to his father and to ask for his mercy. That third state, that state of helpless starvation, represents hungering and thirsting after righteousness.

Now, in an objective sense, all humanity are spiritually starving. Only the blessed acknowledge their hunger and come to Christ.

I am reminded of those words by Thomas Watson:

> How sweet and awesome is the place
> With Christ within the doors,
> While everlasting love displays
> The choicest of her stores.
>
> While all our hearts and all our songs
> Join to admire the feast,
> Each of us cry, with thankful tongues,

“Lord, why was I a guest?

“Why was I made to hear thy voice,
And enter while there's room,
When thousands make a wretched choice,
And rather starve than come?”

'Twas the same love that spread the feast
That sweetly drew us in;
Else we had still refused to taste,
And perished in our sin.

Are you hungering and thirsting for righteousness? If you are, you will follow the Good Shepherd as He leads His sheep to green pastures. If you are, you will come to the banquet God has prepared. You will seek out a Church where Christ is worshipped and where the Bible is taught, and you will attend it regularly. And you will pray that God will use these means of grace to work faith in your heart so that you may feed upon Christ. If you have no interest in this spiritual banquet which God has prepared for His people, how can you think you are among those who hunger and thirst for righteousness?

6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.