

Hungering and Thirsting for Righteousness

Psalm 1:1-6; Matthew 5:1-12 (text)

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Beloved Congregation of Christ: Our text this morning, commonly known as the Beatitudes, is usually preached as a set of moral values for which we must strive. The Beatitudes is not about an ideal character in an ideal, future utopia. But it is about life in the kingdom of heaven even in the midst of this fallen, sinful world. Here's a quote from a sermon: The poor, the trampled, the voiceless, the seekers of righteousness, the merciful who extend mercy when it goes against common judgement: Jesus says, "Blessed are all of them."

In the sermon from which I quoted this, sin is not even mentioned once.¹ Some pastors try to apply this teaching of Jesus to all – Christians and non-Christians – to preach social ethics and justice. To be sure, this teaching also tells Christians how they are to relate to society, but it cannot be separated from faith in our Lord Jesus Christ as its basis. For Jesus says in verse 11 that Christians are blessed even when they are persecuted "on my account," or "because of me."

Augustine, the great 4th century theologian, was the first one to call Matthew 5-7 the "Sermon on the Mount." And Matthew 5:1-12 is known as the "Beatitudes," a word that means "blessings," or benediction. These three chapters were probably taught by Jesus several times on many occasions, possibly in several installments.

In each beatitude, there are three components: (1) a pronouncement of blessing on a particular group; (2) the character of the group; and (3) the particular blessing on each group.

But what does it mean to be blessed? Some modern translations use the word "happy," but this is unfortunate. Happiness is just a part of being blessed. One can be happy with possessions, family, beauty, career, fame, health and other material things, but not blessed. Only those in the kingdom of God, those who have a saving relationship with Christ can be truly blessed by God, though in his abounding grace and love, God sends his good things to all his creation.

And who is the blessed one? In Psalm 1, we find the description of a person who is blessed. This person is a godly person (verse 1). And the main part of this description is that answer: "*his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night*" (verse 2). And in the Beatitudes, the blessed are those who recognize their spiritual poverty, are humble, repentant over sin, meek and have peace with God. This is totally contrary to the world's expectations.

So this morning, as we study the Beatitudes, ask yourself, "What's the highest priority in my life? Is it possessions, or family, or career, or health? Have I known what and how it is to be truly blessed and truly happy?"

¹ Park Terrace Community United Methodist Church, "How to be Happy," 2/2/2014. <https://parkterraceumc.net/2014/02/02/how-to-be-happy/>. Accessed 3/1/2018.

Hungering and Thirsting for Righteousness

Instead of expounding each of the first eight Beatitudes in verses 3-9, we will start with verse 6, *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.”*² This verse is the center or pivot of the first eight Beatitudes.² On this verse depends the blessedness of a Christian. His blessed state before God then turns into his blessed relationship with his neighbors. So in verse 3, those who recognize their spiritual poverty and receive God’s mercy are blessed. The corresponding beatitude is verse 7, where those who have received mercy will then be so thankful to God that he cannot but be merciful to those who are also in spiritual poverty. Verse 4 corresponds to verse 8, since those who mourn over their sins will then desire to be pure in heart, to flee from their sins. In verses 5 and 9, those who are meek and humble will then be the best peacemakers, bringing peace with God and with men.

If we recognize our spiritual poverty and sinfulness, mourn over our sins, and live humbly because of these, the outcome is a hungering and thirsting for righteousness. We will seek and long for it, not our own righteousness. For we know that we are hopeless and helpless in sin.

The Bible has many references to those who hunger and thirst for God’s righteousness. In our Call to Worship, God invites all who are thirsty and hungry, *“Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat!”* (Isa 55:1) Those who come will delight in this food, and their soul will live. This is not physical food and drink, but spiritual food and drink. We also sang a part of Psalm 42, *“As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.”*

Water is often used in Scripture as a figure for the Holy Spirit. We see this in God’s promise of restoration to his people in Isaiah 44:3, *“For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants.”* Jesus also used this figurative language in John 7:37, *“If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink.”* John then comments, *“Now, this he said about the Spirit”* (verse 39). The Spirit, therefore, is the source of God’s blessings upon his people.

Also, bread is often used in Scripture as a figure for God’s Word. In Matthew 4:4, Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 8:3, where it says, *“man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.”* And this Bread came down from heaven when Jesus was born. So in John 6, Jesus taught that he was the True Bread that came down from heaven, not the manna in the wilderness. So he said in John 6:35, *“I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.”* The Word of God, therefore, is Jesus, the Bread of Life. A person who does not have God’s Word and the Bread of Life is famished, as God warned Israel in Amos 8:11, *“I will send a famine on the land—not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD.”* So Jesus tells us in Matthew 6:31-33 not to be anxious about food and drink and clothes, but *“seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”*

² For this insight, I am indebted to Daniel M. Doriani, *Matthew Volume I: Chapters 1-13* in Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 113-6, 120-1.

When we long for God's Word, God's kingdom, and his righteousness, we are blessed. Yes, we may be blessed with material things, but we will never be truly happy without God in our lives. When we don't hunger and thirst for God's Word and Spirit, we will be famished.

Receiving Mercy, Then Being Merciful

The first one who is blessed by God is he who is *"poor in spirit."* In Luke 6:20, Jesus says only "the poor." Does this mean that poverty in itself is a state of blessing, just as monks and nuns think? No, this means that the good news of Christ is received by people – whether poor or rich – who recognize their spiritual poverty. There are billions of poor in the world, but they are not citizens of the kingdom of heaven unless they believe in Jesus as Savior.

Those who are "poor in spirit" recognize their need for a Savior and who do not rest on their own goodness. They have humble thoughts of themselves, flee to the perfect righteousness of Jesus and not to their own righteousness and strength. When they recognize their sinfulness and come to Christ, they are forgiven and receive salvation. God showers his grace and mercy to these humble and repentant sinners. Therefore, they are received into the kingdom of heaven.

Remember the Pharisee and the tax collector praying in the temple in Luke 18? The Pharisee, standing, gave thanks to God for all the good works that he does. But the tax collector, humbly kneeling, prayed, *"God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"* Jesus says this contrite tax collector, not the Pharisee, was declared righteous by God.

How did this tax collector recognize his sinfulness? Because he hungered and thirst for God's Word and Spirit, his satisfaction was not his wealth, but righteousness. And he knew his poverty in righteousness, his spiritual poverty. He knew he was spiritually hopeless and helpless without God, so he sought and longed for righteousness. So he asked God for help in finding righteousness.

And after he finds God's righteousness because of God's mercy, he cannot help but be merciful to others who are also spiritually poor. Because he understands his own sinfulness, failures and weaknesses, he becomes more patient, understanding and compassionate to others who are what he used to be.

He then is one of those whom Jesus says in verse 7, *"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy."* He now understands that Jesus desires and demands that we be merciful (Matt 9:13; 23:23). He knows that Jesus commands him to forgive, because he has been forgiven much by the Savior (Mark 11:25; Col 3:13). He offers help to others, whether or not they deserve it. And he then receives God's unending mercy for being merciful to others.

Mourning Over Sin, Then Being Pure in Heart

Next, we read in verse 4, *"Blessed are those who mourn."* Again, this does not mean that anyone who mourns over the death of a loved one is blessed. No, multitudes of non-Christians mourn over their loved ones, but they are not blessed by God. Others mourn for other reasons: criminals mourn that they are in prison; husbands mourn that they were caught with other women; corrupt politicians mourn that they lost an election. These are not blessed either.

Rather, Jesus is teaching about mourning about sinfulness. How can a person who mourn over his sin be blessed? This seems contradictory. But Paul says in 2 Corinthians 7:9–10, *“I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting . . . For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret.”* In Psalm 119:136, the psalmist mourns because of the sin of the people, *“My eyes shed streams of tears, because people do not keep your law.”* James also exhorts us to mourn over our sins, *“Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom”* (Jas 4:9).

Godly repentance leads to salvation and rejoicing. This means that God blesses those of you who mourn over your sins, your brothers’ and sisters’ sins, your families’ sins, national sins such as abortion, homosexuality and rebellious youth. God blesses those of you who mourn over the unbelief and rejection of Christianity and the condescending reception of Islam in our nation.

And what does the sin-mourner receive? He receives comfort from God. God forgives your sins and cleanses you of your sinfulness. He gives you the Holy Spirit, so you may resist the temptations of sins.

And what does the sin-mourner do to thank God for giving him comfort and forgiveness? We find the answer in verse 8, *“Blessed are the pure in heart.”* Who are the pure in heart? The pure in heart are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. They internalize the righteousness taught in God’s Word. They are not merely hearers, but doers of the Word. In the Old Testament, Moses called on Israel to circumcise their hearts, which means, “Cut off your sinfulness!” (Deu 10:16). Samuel said, *“To obey is better than sacrifice”* (1 Sam 15:22). In Psalm 24:3–4, David asks about going to the temple to worship, *“Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart.”*

After you mourn over your sins, do you desire to be pure in heart? You have received mercy and forgiveness from God, so do not dwell on them. Do not mourn over them as if you have not been forgiven. The good news is that God has turned your mourning into rejoicing, your garments of mourning into garments of gladness (Psa 30:11). So move on to living a pure life, and you will be rewarded with seeing Jesus as he is, face to face, in all his glory (1 John 3:2).

Being Meek, Then Being a Peacemaker

Those who recognize their spiritual poverty mourn over their sins. And those who truly mourn over their sins will be meek or humble. For how can one boast when God has delivered him from the wretchedness of sinfulness? Meekness does not mean shyness, but the gentle, humble and unassuming character of one who knows his spiritual poverty and God’s mercy. The meek do not demand special rights, because they trust in God’s provision. So, they might not have all the possessions on this earth, but they trust that God will give them all the blessings of a new heaven and a new earth that is still to come. Now we enjoy some of the spiritual and material blessings of being in the kingdom of God. But the fullness of the earth is still to come.

And what does the meek do with being blessed by God? First, as they hunger and thirst for righteousness found in God’s Word, they have peace in themselves. They know that they have

been reconciled by Christ to God because they have been forgiven of their sins. Jesus had given them *“peace that surpasses all understanding”* (Phil 4:7).

Second, because the meek do not promote or assert themselves or demand recognition or seek advantage, they have no favoritism. The meek then become the best peacemakers. So Jesus says in verse 9, *“Blessed are the peacemakers.”* People trust more those whom they know are not seeking any advantage than those whom they know have hidden motivations.

Therefore, peacemaking is both individual and communal. One who is in Christ have inner peace and peace with God. He also recognizes the need for him to be a peacemaker in a conflict. But he also knows that the most important peace to be sought is peace with God, so he shares the good news of salvation by faith alone in Christ alone to those in need of inner peace.

Jesus says that those who receive and believe in Christ confess their spiritual poverty, mourn over sins, and are meek peacemakers. And they are the ones to whom John 1:12 refers, *“But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”* They are no longer aliens outside of God’s kingdom but are now members of God’s household.

Dear Friends: The Beatitudes are difficult words for us, because we know that we always fall short of these teachings. But our Lord Jesus Christ himself is our example of one who mourned over sin, meek, hungered and thirsted for righteousness, is merciful, pure in heart, and peacemaker.

Though he is not poor in spirit –for he is our sinless Savior – yet he mourned. He did not mourn over his sins, but he mourned for the sins of his people. Other than Moses, he is the meekest person who ever walked on this earth (Matt 11:29). Since he is the Son of God, in all his life on earth, he hungered and thirsted for righteousness, a life of perfect righteousness. He was merciful and compassionate in his mission to save his people from sin. He had a pure heart, without sin, because his mission was to be the sinless Lamb of God. And he is our Peacemaker, giving us peace with God and peace with our neighbors.

As we come to the Lord’s Table this morning, let us hear his invitation:

John 6:35: “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.

John 7:37: “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink.

Revelation 21:6: To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment.

Revelation 22:17: And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.