

THE BEATITUDES: JESUS' CALL TO HAPPINESS

Matthew 4:17-5:12

“Blessed are those who Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness...”

Matthew 5:6

There is a subtle difference between today's beatitude and all of the others. And, it is this subtle difference that is essential to understanding what Jesus means when he says, *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.”*

The other Beatitudes read: *“Blessed are the poor in spirit...Blessed are those who mourn...Blessed are the meek...Blessed are the merciful...Blessed are the peacemakers...Blessed are the persecuted...”* And then there is *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...”* Do you hear it? Do you hear the difference? Jesus does not say, “Blessed are the righteous.” Jesus says, *“Blessed are those who **hunger and thirst** for righteousness. Blessed are those who **desire** righteousness.”* A subtle, and a significant difference from the other beatitudes, especially when we consider that the Pharisees—the religious people of Jesus day—considered themselves **to be righteous**; not hungering and thirsting for it, but already righteous. I do believe that this is one of Jesus' first digs at the Pharisees; at those who were so religiously arrogant.

Matthew records two other occasions when Jesus refers to righteousness. They are both found later in the Sermon on the Mount; the Beatitudes being the introduction to the sermon. In the first reference Jesus says, *“...unless your righteousness **exceeds** that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will **never** enter the kingdom of heaven.”* Wow! And, ouch! This statement had to scald the Pharisees!

The second time Jesus refers to righteousness is a bit different. Listen as I read the verses leading up to when Jesus mentions righteousness for the second time, and see if you can catch the difference. (Read 6:25-33) Did you hear the difference? In this instance, Jesus is referring to God's righteousness—not to human righteousness. *“...strive first for the kingdom of God, and God's righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”*

Righteousness! Jesus says that those who hunger and thirst for, or desire, righteousness, are blessed and happy. He also criticizes the righteousness of some religious folk, the Pharisees, while encouraging the striving for God's righteousness. What is righteousness?

In the Old Testament—pre-Jesus—righteousness was associated with keeping

and observing religious law and ritual. It was following the Ten Commandments. It was praying several times a day. A person's state of righteousness was determined by faithfulness in worship and by giving a tithe. Righteousness was **doing** the right things! The Pharisees did the right things; that is why they considered themselves righteous—not striving for it but having it. Yet, Jesus said, “...*unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*”

Friends, it is paramount for us to understand that there was something deficient with the Pharisees understanding of righteousness; but, Jesus was not the first to recognize or to mention this. Listen now as I read from Amos, an Old Testament prophet who is sharing what he understands to be words from God. (Read Amos 5:21-24)

God wants something more from us than the keeping of religious law and rituals. Friends, God wants more from us than worship attendance, stewardship, singing religious songs and reading the Bible. God wants more from us than Pharisee-like religious arrogance. So what is it that God wants? What is this righteousness that Jesus says we should strive for **first** even before our physical needs? Relationship! God wants relationship with us. God does not want us to be just a bunch of rule keepers. He wants us to love him and for us to know that He loves us. And then, from out of that love we will worship and live our lives in a way that is pleasing to God. God does not want us to live rightly out of a fear of punishment as the Pharisees did. God desires for us to live rightly out of our love for God and our desire to not disappoint God. And that my friends is a subtle difference of paramount importance. And further, Jesus sums up this difference when he identifies that the greatest commandment is to love God with one's entire being, and that the second commandment is to love others; and then Jesus says that all of the rest of the law and the words of the prophets, or what I might call the religious stuff hangs on these two—loving God and loving others.

My friends—**We must get the love part right!** If we do not get the love part right it does not much matter what we believe about anything else—the cross, communion, the Bible, or the afterlife. It just does not matter if we do not get the love part right. Because according to Jesus everything hangs on the love part!

In today's beatitude Jesus is saying that happy are those who hunger and thirst for relationship with God. Hunger and thirst; interesting words for Jesus to use. None of us have probably ever experienced true hunger. Yet, we know what it is like to be hungry. Some of us may be hungry right now. In a little while we will eat lunch. We will have our hunger satisfied so that we will never have to eat again. Is that right? We eat once and it is all over? We are satisfied forever? No! We will eat again. We keep replenishing. We are designed to need more! One meal is not enough. And neither is one filling of God enough! Jesus says,

*“Happy are those who **hunger and thirst** for relationship with God...”* Happy are those who desire God over and over and over. For you see that is how we are designed. As we have our physical needs so do we have our spiritual needs—a hunger for God—a desire to continually replenish our spirits; wanting more of God.

More of God means more like God. More of God means more of God’s will, such as loving one another, becoming evident in our lives. More of God means making more impact upon the world in which we live. More of God means more understanding of who God is and what God wants from us. More of God means paying attention to our spiritual needs on a regular basis just as we do our physical needs. Our spiritual needs will be met when we desire more of God; knowing that righteousness is dependent upon our relationship with God and not upon our being religious as were the Pharisees. Jesus-type righteousness is about relationship.

According to an ancient story, a religious prophet meets a man one day who wants to find the path to spiritual life—to relationship with God. The prophet leads the man down into a river, where the man assumes he is being taken for some kind of purification ritual. Suddenly the prophet grabs the man and thrusts him under the water and holds him there. After a few moments the man finally is able to free himself and comes up gasping for breath. The prophet then asks him, “When you thought you were drowning what did you desire most?” “Air!” The man exclaims! “Air!” Then the prophet says, “When you desire spiritual nourishment, relationship with God, as much as you wanted air, then you will have it.”

*“Happy are those who **hunger and thirst** for spiritual replenishment, for relationship with God, for they shall be satisfied.”*