

# CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	THE BEATITUDES	Pastor/Teacher
Number:	5	Gary L.W. Johnson
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## Blessed Are Those Who Hunger and Thirst After Righteousness

F. D. Brunner correctly points out that this is the last of the first series of blessings: the *need* Beatitudes of faith. All four of these introductory Beatitudes present the blessed as persons *in need*: lacking in (a) spirit, (b) happiness, (c) power, and now (d) righteousness. It is to these - the dispirited, the unhappy, the powerless, and the consciously (or penitently) unrighteous - that Jesus gives His promise. In fact, properly understood, the first two *need* Beatitudes cannot be *done* at all. In both, the blessed are victims. How does one *do* poverty in spirit or heartbrokenness without self-contortion or caricature? The fact that one cannot *do* the first two Beatitudes in a sermon that has as its focus the *doing* (and not merely the wanting to do) of God's will, points to a reality of first importance: Jesus' mercy precedes Jesus' demand.<sup>1</sup> The first three Beatitudes cause us to look at *ourselves*. Now, however, there is a change in emphasis. We begin to turn away from an examination of our condition to God. Our helplessness has been in the forefront. "Here," notes Lloyd-Jones, "we turn and look for the solution, for the deliverance from self for which we long."<sup>2</sup> There is longing after that which they know they do not possess and which they know they urgently need. The Puritan preacher Jeremiah Burroughs long ago observed, "There is a generation of men and women in the world who have sin and guilt enough upon their spirits, yet they scarcely ever call to mind or question what the terms are between God and their own souls, how things stand between God and themselves; what God has to charge them with all; whether God has anything against them or not. How few of you this morning who have come into the presence of God have had your thoughts working thus? Oh, my soul, how is it with you? How do matters stand between God and you? What guilt is it you have upon your spirit? What has Divine Justice to charge you with? Conscience, speak freely and fully: What is there in heaven against me? Is there anything upon record I am charged with? How is it between God and me? Oh, what strangers are most men unto such thoughts as these! But they go on in a sleepy, sure, and dead-hearted way. Either they believe there is no guilt at all upon their spirits, or no great evil in that guilt, or else think 'tis no great matter for God to pardon. You are very solicitous for the flesh, what you shall eat and drink and what you shall put on, and for your estates, how to get and increase in the world. But to make up the records between God and your souls, to get them discharged, and the records of heaven canceled that are against you? Oh, how seldom these things take up your thoughts! Know this, you who are of such careless spirits about this great matter of pardon of sin, it is a great aggravation of your sin that you are so careless about that great work of God in

pardoning sin. You are careless and spend but a few thoughts about that which has (if I may so speak with holy reverence) taken up the heart of the infinite God from all eternity. Certainly none of the works of God towards His creatures have taken up the thoughts and heart of God as much as this one work of the pardon of sin. And yet your thoughts are not taken up with it; you little mind it. Certainly there is a great disproportion between your thoughts and God's, whereas those who are godly should labor to work as God works. And those things that have taken up the heart of God should take up your hearts. Instead, those things that are even unworthy of an immortal soul take up your thoughts, and those objects that take up the thoughts and heart of God about pardoning sin, your own consciences can tell you, is very little in your thoughts and hearts.”<sup>3</sup>

I. **THE STARVING SOUL: IT'S BLESSEDNESS.** The language of the text underscores the necessity of righteousness. “Christ is saying you need righteousness like you need food. Our physical life depends on food and water; our spiritual life depends on righteousness.”<sup>4</sup> Note that we are *not* instructed to hunger and thirst after blessedness or happiness - which is exactly what people do! We put happiness and blessedness as the one thing that we desire, and thus we always miss it; it always eludes us. As Lloyd-Jones observes, “According to the Scriptures, happiness is never something that should be sought directly; it is always something that results from seeking something else.”<sup>5</sup> Why is this condition of the soul called *blessed*? The point was made at the beginning of this series that the Beatitudes are structured in a logical sequence and cannot be properly understood any other way. The first three Beatitudes all express our need, the fourth addresses this need. “Jesus does not bless those conscious of their righteousness, the self-consciously successful, the achiever, the people of the victorious life. Rather, God's promise is given here to people for whom righteousness, victory, vindication, and right conduct seem painfully missing.”<sup>6</sup>

II. **THE STARVING SOUL: IT'S DESIRE.** *Hunger* and *thirst* are the results of strong desire and are accompanied by an equally strong endeavor to satisfy the need. If a child is really hungry, he will not sleep or play regardless of the toys you place before him. Such is the condition of those in this Beatitude who hunger and thirst after righteousness.

A. **Righteousness.** This term has a wide semantic range in Scripture. It is sometimes used of personal righteousness (as in right relations with other people); it is sometimes used in the broad sense of outward justice. In Paul's epistles, righteousness or justification is a term that is judicial or forensic; to pronounce or declare to be righteous, as in Rom. 4:5, where God “justifies the ungodly”. “The great words *sēdāqâ* (Hebrew) and *dikaiousynē* (Greek) are both theologically freighted throughout the Bible. The *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* article on this family of words extends for fifty-one densely packed pages. The key to it all is that *sēdāqâ* does not refer to an absolute ideal ethical norm but is out and out a term denoting a relationship. Every relationship makes claims on conduct and the satisfaction of these claims, which issue from the relationship and in which alone the relationship can persist, is described by our term *tsadaq*.”<sup>7</sup>

**NOTE:** How are we to understand the term here? It cannot refer to a human righteousness. The first three Beatitudes rule that out (cf. Mt. 6:33, “Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness”). It does affect conduct (whether personal or social), but first and foremost this righteousness is out of human reach and as such is a gift of God’s grace. In fact, it is a perfect righteousness.<sup>8</sup>

**III. THE STARVING SOUL: IT’S PROMISE.** Note the tense of the verb: “Blessed are they *which do* hunger and thirst.” There is implied a *dual* experience. There is the *initial* aspect where salvation - being justified by Christ and His righteousness is realized by faith. This, however, does not quench the hunger and thirst for righteousness. Why? Because the believing *sinner* longs for the freedom from the *presence* of sin. This is a continuing process. And there is a final future aspect. This future aspect is captured in our text, “They *shall* be filled.” They shall be “like Him” (I Jn. 3:2). Then and only then will sin be done with - then shall we “hunger no more, neither thirst anymore” (Rev. 7:16). Leon Morris points out, “But we must not minimize his emphasis on grace either (cf. v. 3). Specifically we should notice that he is not suggesting that people can make a strong effort and achieve the righteousness of which he is writing: it is a given righteousness, not an achieved righteousness. The blessed do not achieve it but *hunger and thirst* for it. They *will be filled*, which surely means that God will fill them (cf. 6:33, “his righteousness”). We need not doubt that the term here includes the doing of right, an indication that we are expected to live in full accordance with the will of God. How could anyone have a strong desire for a right standing before God without at the same time strongly wanting to do the right? Today there is a strong emphasis on social righteousness, the liberation of people from oppression, and that can scarcely be out of mind either. *Righteousness* is a rich and full concept, but whichever way we understand it, it is a righteousness that people cannot produce of themselves. We are to do our best and we may be able to avoid “the gutters of life,” but this righteousness is a gift of God. And of those who have this wholehearted longing for the right Jesus says, *they will be filled*. They do not achieve it of themselves, but God fulfils their longing. God will not disappoint anyone who has this deep desire to do his will. Those who long for righteousness will have a full measure, not a mere trace.”<sup>9</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** Here you see the genuine Christian who at the one and the same time (as Luther put it, *simul iustus et peccator*, “at once righteous and a sinner”) is filled yet longing. The more he is filled, the more he hungers and thirsts. Do not hunger for some vague “blessing”. Do not even hunger for some spiritual mountain-top experience. Hunger and thirst for righteousness. “This Beatitude concludes, ‘For they shall be satisfied.’ This is another case of the ‘divine passive’. God is the one who will satisfy them. For many this is a strange idea. Popularly understood, righteousness is not more than adherence to an ethical norm. The person who keeps the law, follows the accepted standards of the community and has an admirable personal life will be respected and thereby satisfied *by the community*. But if righteousness describes a relationship granted as a gift of God that brings peace, then only God can satisfy the longing for that righteousness and the approval or disapproval of the community is irrelevant. We are not righteous to please our peers but to show gratitude to God and maintain our

relationship with him. Each day, prompted by hunger and thirst, all people seek food and water hoping to be satisfied. But for how long? A few hours later the cravings return. This Beatitude makes clear that the blessed are those whose drive for righteousness is as pervasive, all-consuming and recurring as the daily yearning to satisfy hunger and thirst. Hungering and thirsting for that righteousness can only be satisfied by God.”<sup>10</sup>

## Endnotes

1. F. D. Bruner, *The Christbook: A Historical/Theological Commentary, Matthew 1-12* (Word, 1987), p. 141. Bruner notes that the popular maxim, “God helps those who help themselves,” found in various forms in the Muslim Koran - is a rather graceless truth and is not often helpful to troubled persons. “God helps people who need help simply because they need help, not because they meet spiritual conditions,” p. 142.
2. D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* (Eerdmans, 1959), p. 74.
3. J. Burroughs, *Gospel Remission* (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria, 1995), p. 129
4. J. MacArthur, *Kingdom Living Here and Now* (Moody, 1980), p. 89.
5. Lloyd-Jones, p. 75.
6. Bruner, p. 142.
7. Kenneth Gailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (IVP, 2008), p. 77.
8. I make this statement not only because it has theological support from elsewhere in the N.T. (especially Paul’s Epistles), but because the grammar of the Greek text supports it. In the Greek language it is a rule of good grammar that verbs of hungering and thirsting (in the physical sense) are followed by nouns in the genitive case. In English we would translate this with the last words in phrases like “peace of mind” or “love of God”. To express hunger in Greek it would be “I am hungry for of food.” This is called a partitive genitive, meaning that only part of the object (food) is implied (thus “I am hungry for of food” means I need some food, not all food. The Greek text of this passage does not follow the normal order. Instead of “righteousness” appearing in the genitive (as would be expected) it occurs in the accusative. What does this mean? That the righteousness desired is not partial or imperfect. The direct accusative means the person wants all or complete righteousness. Cf. extended discussions by W. Barclay, *The Beatitudes and the Lord’s Prayer for Everyman* (Harper and Row, 1957), p. 55, and J. M. Boice, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Zondervan, 1972), pp. 45-46.
9. L. Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Eerdmans, 1992), p. 99.
10. Bailey, op. cit.