

Thirsting for Righteousness

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We're looking at the fourth Beatitude in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, "*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they shall be satisfied.*" These words mark a definite turn. Jesus has been working down the path of self-reflection—blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek—but here he takes an outward turn to righteousness. Let's get behind Jesus and work our way round the bend to *satisfaction* by looking at three terms: righteousness, hunger and thirst, satisfied.

Obstacles to Righteousness

Righteousness is a word that's fallen out of use in popular culture. We might hear someone say, "Man, that was righteous!" Which means that something is somewhere between cool and awesome. But like our use of awesome and cool, it doesn't contain definite meaning. It's subjective, assigning a "Like" to something we enjoy. But when the Hebrews used "righteousness," it referred to an objective state of things or people being "in the right." Righteousness was *personal rectitude* that came from obedience to Torah, God's revealed will. It's **personal order** that lines a person up with the kingdom of God and issues in a host of virtues like purity, kindness, compassion, love, patience, discipline, contentment. **When we say righteousness we're talking about definite moral goodness, virtue, character that takes its cues from God.** Now, there are a number of obstacles to righteousness today. The first is **moral ambivalence**, the hesitation to make a firm moral claim. When a moral issue comes up—gossip about a coworker, greed of an ambitious boss, the pride in a friend, you remain seated. You don't take a stand. When moral ambivalence begins to fill a society it results in what CSL called, "men without chests," people who lack conviction and moral courage. Virtues turn into *values*. And values are soft and mushy. You can value family, but arrange family any way you want multiple wives, swingers, same-sex parents, traditional family values. Or "I value community," while talking about them behind their back or living a highly individualistic life. Or I value the church as long as it doesn't cost me anything. What good is a value when it is so easily bent? The second obstacle to righteousness is **virtue replacement**. In a moral vacuum, people reach out for a stabilizer and grab onto things that make them feel secure or successful. Today, there is a tendency to grab community service as a replacement for character. David Brooks writes, "[Today, community service is sometimes used as a patch to cover over in articulateness about the inner life...We tend to convert moral questions into resource allocation questions.](#)" What does he mean? He means that when businesses are asked about how they promote character, they respond by discussing philanthropy. When schools are asked how they instill virtues, they present their adopt-a-highway clean up initiative. When you ask a person about virtue, may draw a blank. Or you may think of how hard you work, or how you serve the poor in Northgate or Manchaca II. But you remain dispassionate and inarticulate about faith, hope, & love/righteousness. The SOM doesn't make the list. We have lost a moral vocabulary. Which makes the biblical idea of righteousness all the more unique and important. It provides a plumbline for both social order and personal virtue. It provides a fixed moral vocabulary. We see this in the background text to the Beatitudes, Isaiah 61, where God says that he hates robbery and racism and loves *righteousness/justice*

(same word). So the word righteousness includes both personal and social order that comes from God. The third obstacle to righteousness is the opposite of hungering and thirsting for righteousness; it is **spiritual sloth**. Sloth, Prof of Philosophy at Boston College says, is not a hot sin but a cold one, and because of that it is all the more dangerous. It's the leech of ambivalence on the heart of faith. It's what happens when, as Chesterton said, humility moves from the organ of ambition to the organ of truth. You apologize for righteousness and advocate doubt all from the armchair. You struggle to read the Bible, bend a knee in prayer but can sit for hours staring at a screen. In the words of Jesus you are *lukewarm*. He says to the church, "**because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth**" (Rev 3:14). Spiritual sloth is a treacherous thing. The word spit means vomit, to be expelled from the mouth of Christ because of moral ambivalence, virtue replacement, and indifference to God. In the words of Jesus, "*if salt has lost its taste...it is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet*" (13). Have you lost your saltiness, replaced virtues with values? Are you lukewarm? How do we become hot, passionate for the right?

Hunger & Thirst

Jesus solution is: hunger and thirst for righteousness. Hunger and thirst aren't optional to life; they're **vital** to life. If we didn't sense hunger and thirst, we wouldn't eat or drink, and we'd die. In fact, we're so dependant on eating and drinking that an internal notification goes off every few hours. And we eat, 3 big or 5 small meals a day. Here's the point, hunger is vital to life. So it is with spiritual life, to thriving as a whole person. If you don't hunger and thirst for righteousness, your soul will shrivel up and die. To get to hunger you may have to force yourself to get around the food. Anorexics have a hard time with this. They need food so badly but avoid it. If you're shriveled inside, it may be hard to think of getting close to God, slowing down your life, confessing your sins, and making a list of virtues you need to cultivate. But you need it to live! Hunger is vital but it's also **painful**. Hunger and thirst aren't comfortable sensations. Think of the gnawing and growling of your stomach as lunch approaches. Or dry throated heaving after a run. Hunger is painful, but it prompts satisfaction. Are you inviting the pain of discipline for the joy of satisfaction? St. Paul reminds the church to "*discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness.*" You want righteousness? Get discipline. In Christian circles there's this odd idea that going to church services or being around other Christians will manifest more character. It's like thinking going to entrepreneurial conferences and hanging out with entrepreneurs will make you one. But it doesn't. You have to roll up your sleeves and do the hard work. Bite down on the pain, embrace the discipline, and get to work on righteousness. You have a plan for the future; a plan for parties, but do you have a plan for your character? Start and end your day with 15 minutes of prayer. Join a Fight Club and start fighting for holiness in specific areas. Get a copy of the fabulous book *You Can Change* and start a change project. Develop moral conviction, become men with chests. A final observation. It's **clarifying**. Something interesting happened when I went on a diet from carbs and sugars, and ate primarily vegetables and protein. The first time I ate a dessert I remember being incredibly disappointed. The sugar tasted synthetic, impure. My taste buds had acclimated to better diet, natural sugars in fruit. Eliminating processed foods awakened my taste buds to flavor. It was amazing. Similarly, spiritual hunger creates moral clarity. You begin to enjoy

godliness. It awakens you to a longing for God and his work in the world. You become seized by the richness of Scripture and the urgency of making disciples. If you'll change your diet from values to virtues, sloth to a steady pursuit of righteousness.

Deep Satisfaction

The promise that comes attached to this Beatitude is satisfaction. See, when you've sunk your teeth into righteousness, losing the taste for spiritual sloth and mushy values, it satisfies. Now, I'm not saying this is magic or easy. Remember it can be painful, and it requires effort. **Satisfaction comes at the crossroads of sovereign grace and personal effort.** It requires both.

- Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling (obedience), for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. Phil 2:12-13
- Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. Ps 90:14
- Incline my heart to your testimonies, and not to selfish gain! Ps 119:36
- God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. 1 Cor 1:9
- "Jesus is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power" (1:3)

Satisfaction comes at the crossroads of sovereign grace and personal effort. All kinds of stuff with fight us for it: fleeting promises, spiritual sloth, depressive feelings, gnawing loneliness, self-righteous independence but these are notifications that we need to run to the source of righteousness. The source is the kingdom of God where righteousness dwells in the radiant expression of God. Do you know what the radiance of God is? The letter of Hebrews tells: "Jesus is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power" (1:3). **Jesus is the radiating, all-satisfying glory of God that holds your atoms together.** Know him and you know satisfaction. Deep satisfaction. Forever satisfaction. Sure, things will get in the way. You'll slip off your diet, but the more you stay on it, the more you'll be satisfied. The more your soul will be content, the more you'll hold up Jesus as the source of all satisfaction and marvel at his radiance. This is Christ's promise to you. *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they shall be satisfied!*