

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” This week's beatitude is... like the three previous beatitudes... somewhat paradoxical in the form in which Jesus is presenting it to us. We have heard over the past three weeks: blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, and blessed are the meek. And our initial thoughts might make us wonder how any of us suffering those circumstances can be considered blessed. Until we look at those beatitudes as Jesus intended them. And we realize Jesus is really teaching us about virtues that don't typically exist out in the secular thinking world. And once we come to understand them... that these three beatitudes are all about humility, and trust in God, and being more gentle and caring and content... then they suddenly take on a whole new meaning for us. And we want to embody those virtues because they make us feel... well, very happy and very blessed indeed.

And so it is with today's beatitude. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.” Because think about it, what is it that most people, even us, hunger and thirst for in this world. If we're honest, I would suspect that many of us might say we hunger for wealth – material pleasures and conveniences, we hunger for acceptance from others, we hunger for honor and even power. We all hunger for something that we think will make our lives more satisfying. But how many of us get up in the morning and say, “I hunger for righteousness today”? To be truthful, seeking righteousness is probably low on our list of priorities if we even think about it at all. You see, since Adam and Eve to today, the fundamental human problem is that we seek something other than God. So let's look further at what Jesus is saying about seeking righteousness.

But perhaps first, to put this beatitude about righteous living in better perspective, a modern day parable is in order. In the nineteenth century a student from the United States went to visit and learn from the famous Polish rabbi, Hafez Hayyim. When the student arrived at the rabbi's home, he was astonished to see that it consisted of just one simple room filled with books. The only furniture was a cot, a table, and a bench. “Rabbi, where is your furniture?” asked the student. “Where is yours?” replied Hafez. “Mine, Rabbi? But I'm only a visitor here.” The rabbi responded, “So am I.”¹

¹ The Song of the Bird, Anthony De Mello

Now what this parable implies is that maybe the virtue of righteousness is more important than anything else in this life. Because one day we will all have to stand before God, and nothing else we have will matter. So then, what exactly is righteousness? Well, we all know people who are self-righteous and we certainly aren't talking about that vice. Instead righteousness can best be defined by how 'right' you are with God. How 'right' you are with your brothers and sisters. How 'right' you are here... deep inside, in your heart and mind and soul. Yet, isn't it true, that so often we don't feel all that "right" with any one, or even all, of these? And that's most likely because we let the ways of this world mislead us, we let outside pressures get the best of us, we let our problems or our past weigh us down, we let our relationships grow tense. And we waste time worrying. Just think of all the time we spend worrying! And finally our tension level mounts to the point where we're no longer right with others, no longer right with ourselves, and especially, no longer right with God. You know the feeling. Something's very wrong inside. Something feels very empty.

That's why today's beatitude is so important. For Jesus promises us that those who really hunger for and seek righteousness... will be filled. They will be satisfied! You know, two of the basic staples we need in life are bread and water. Which is exactly why Jesus calls himself the "Bread of Life." He said, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." Yes, whoever comes to Jesus will be filled. Here's something interesting. We all know where Jesus was born, right? In the tiny, insignificant town of Bethlehem! And guess what? The name 'Bethlehem' literally means "house of bread". Here, in a small, struggling village, where we might least expect to see the power of God demonstrated in a world gone awry, we find God working out his plan of righteousness for the world. "Though thou are small, oh Bethlehem, a ruler will come from you who will shepherd my people." This is a testament to God's power – his capacity to make things right. For from that tiny town, comes forth the "Bread of Life" for you and me. And we can be filled and made right if we come to him.

I know many of you have seen the Internet series called *The Chosen*. If you haven't, I would strongly recommend that you do. It's a drama about the life of Jesus, obviously driven and inspired by the Gospels, but interspersed with both actual and probable occurrences in the life of Jesus that are presented in such a down to earth and matter-of-fact fashion, that you say to yourself, "That probably did happen to Jesus and his disciples." And in one of the episodes, things begin to go wrong, and outside pressures get the best of his followers, and they allow their problems and their past weigh to

them down, and their relationships grow tense, and they waste their time worrying, and guess what happens? They find they are no longer right with each other, no longer right with themselves, and especially, no longer right with God. And at that point they come to Jesus. For they have finally surmised that he has some special way to connect with God that is the key to his righteousness. “What should we do?” they ask. And Jesus tells them, “Prayer is the first step in getting your heart and mind right.” And the episode dramatically ends with Jesus teaching them to pray the Lord's prayer. “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is heaven...” The scene fades out, but the point is emphatically made. The first step in becoming right with God for them, and for us, is to be in relationship with him through prayer. Starting with the Lord's Prayer.

Now sometimes when we pray this prayer, there is the danger that we just mindlessly repeat it because we have memorized the words so effectively over the years. Consequently, we pray it without attending to what we are saying. But I like J. Ellsworth Kalas' take on this prayer. He says, “‘Thy will be done’ is both the most frightening and the most reassuring of all prayers. It's frightening because, if we mean what we say, we are giving up control. We are telling God that we believe the divine will for our world and for our lives is better than our own will. To pray this prayer is to sign a blank check and to trust God to write in the specifics. But this is also the most reassuring of all prayers. Because what could be safer than the will of an all knowing, loving God. How could we be better off than by putting all our trust, our affairs, including our future, into the hands of such a God?”

Yes, prayer is the answer that will lead us to righteousness. Because it will lead us to a deeper, more intimate relationship with God. And in that closeness with our all-knowing, loving God, we find that our hunger for the things of this world is greatly reduced. For we realize that we have all that we need. We have contentment in the things we can afford, for we find joy in the simple pleasures around us. We feel accepted and honored because we know we are loved by Almighty God. We are given a peace that passes all understanding, even when things aren't going our way. We are given a right perspective on the people and situations in our lives. Yes, when we hunger and thirst for righteousness, we find ourselves filled with the confidence that all is right with our life. You know, I think this particular beatitude is extremely important to Jesus. Because a little later in his Sermon on the Mount, he reiterates this beatitude with slightly different words. He says not to worry about our life, or hunger after things. Instead he says, “Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness.... and all these things will be given to you. All these things will be given to you.” What a promise!

Jesus said, "I am the Bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." So blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness... for they will be filled, satisfied and happy indeed! Amen.