

## The King's Sermon

### *Blessed are the Famished (Matthew 5:6)*

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on March 26, 2017

#### Introduction

- ❖ In our generation, there are plenty of health fads that come and go. There are diets where you don't eat meat or all you eat is meat. You're told to count your carbs or watch your gluten intake. Nutritionists and dietitians are constantly putting out resources teaching us how to eat better and eat healthier. There's a popular nutrition book called *You Are What You Eat*. Essentially it's arguing that if you want to be healthy, you've got to eat healthy. If you want a good body, you've got to eat good food. If all you eat are desserts and pastries, then you'll be a walking, talking cream puff. You are what you eat. That makes sense when it come to food.
  - ▶ But the Bible goes even deeper. **The Bible says you are what you hunger for. You are what you thirst after.** Not just what you eat. The very appetite itself is revealing. What you crave, what you long for, what you desire – tells us who you are. You are what you hunger for.
  
- ❖ That's exactly what we learn in the fourth beatitude, "*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.*" (5:6). **In other words, if you hunger for righteousness, you will be righteous.** You are (and you will be) what you hunger for.
  - ▶ And it works the other way around. **If you are righteous before God, if you are a Christian, then the principle says that you will hunger and thirst for righteousness.** That fits with what I've been saying about the Beatitudes these past few weeks. About how they're not describing characteristics that you have attain to before entering God's kingdom and becoming a Christian. No, the Beatitudes are describing the character of one already who is a Christian, who has been brought into the kingdom by a gracious, merciful King.
  
- ❖ So if you're in the kingdom of heaven, then your life should be marked – not just by an admission of your spiritual poverty, not just by a mourning over your sinful state, and not just by a meek and humble spirit – but by a hungering and thirsting after righteousness.
  - ▶ **There's a beautiful logic to the Beatitudes.** The first three cut you down. They remind us of how bankrupt we are spiritually, how empty we are of righteousness. They're the necessary precursors to our fourth beatitude. Because once you feel the emptiness of your stomach, you get hungry for food. **Likewise, once you feel the emptiness of your soul, you get hungry for righteousness.**
    - So the first three beatitudes describe our neediness (we're poor in spirit, mourning, and meek). The fourth speaks of God's promise to meet that need – to fill us, to satisfy us. Then the next three describe how we live as a result (we're merciful, pure in heart, and a peacemaker). And the last beatitude describes how the world will respond to us (with persecution and reviling).
  
- ❖ **Now the problem with some of us is that the sum total of our Christian experience is the first three beatitudes and we never move on to the fourth and beyond.** We feel plenty bad about our spiritual poverty. We feel guilty because of our unrighteousness. But we're not hungering to be righteous. We're not pursuing righteousness.

- ❖ We're like the starving man, staring at his own navel, mourning over how poor and empty he is – while never looking up to see the feast that God has graciously prepared for him. Or it's like the woman dying of thirst in the wilderness, mourning her pitiful state – while failing to see the oasis God has planted for her. That sadly describes some of us.
  - ▶ **For many years, I have to admit that my experience of Christianity had more to do with avoiding sin than pursuing righteousness.** I was more concerned with not breaking God's law than with doing his will. I felt plenty bad about my sinfulness, and was keenly aware of my neediness, but I wasn't hungering to be filled.
  
- ❖ But if you are what you hunger for – then my lack of hunger for God and his righteousness was extremely revealing. It showed me where I was spiritually at the time, and that was still far from God and his kingdom. Do you see what was missing? **Christians don't just mourn and feel bad about their sins. They hunger and thirst after righteousness.**
  - ▶ Friends, this fourth beatitude is going to ask some tough and possibly uncomfortable questions. **What are you hungry for in life?** What do you desire deep down at your core? What is the one thing you simply cannot do without – everything can be stripped away but this one thing you've got to have?
    - **According to our text, the Christian's honest answer is God and his righteousness.** A disciple hungers and thirsts for righteousness. But there's much more that we could say. So I've divided this message into three parts. 1) We'll consider the object of our spiritual hunger. 2) The significance of our spiritual hunger. 3) The fulfillment of our spiritual hunger.

### The Object of our Spiritual Hunger

- ❖ Let's first look at the object of our spiritual hunger. This is so fundamental. It has everything to do with any of the dissatisfaction you feel in life or specifically the dissatisfaction you feel in relation to the Christian life you're trying to live.
  - ▶ **So much of our Christian life is lived in pursuit of blessings.** We want to be blessed by God, to experience and enjoy his abundant blessings. But it seems the more we chase after blessedness, the less we seem satisfied.
    - Some of you feel very dissatisfied with your experience of the Christian life. You feel like God is withholding his blessings from you. You don't feel blessed. **But could it be that your dissatisfaction stems from the fact that you're hungering for blessedness when you should be hungering for righteousness?**
  
- ❖ Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones makes another great observation in his book on the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>1</sup> **He says that according to this fourth beatitude, blessedness is never something that should be sought directly. It's always something that results from seeking something else.** And in this case, Jesus tells us that something else is *righteousness*.

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<sup>1</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 63-64.

- ❖ Lloyd-Jones was a physician before he became a pastor, so he offers a really good medical analogy. He says most patients just want their doctor to relieve their pain. But a good doctor knows that pain is only a symptom, and she's got to get to the source of the pain or else her patient will be back with the same problem and probably greater pain. If you truly want to be pain free, don't focus on the pain itself – focus on the source.
  - ▶ **In the same way, if you want to experience blessedness, don't chase after blessedness itself – chase after the source. Chase after righteousness.** Hunger and thirst for righteousness, for you shall be satisfied.
    - I wonder how much of the dissatisfaction and disillusionment we have with the Christian life stems from this. From this mistake of wanting so badly to experience God's blessing but failing to see that it comes through pursuing – not the blessing itself – but God's righteousness.
  
- ❖ **But what kind of righteousness did Jesus have in mind?** What kind of righteousness are we to be hungering for? There are three ways that word *righteousness* is used in the Bible.
  
- ❖ First, it could refer to **a legal righteousness** in the eyes of God. To be righteous, in this sense, means to be in right standing before God. It's the most common use in Paul's epistles. But Jesus is probably not telling his audience to hunger after a legal righteousness in the eyes of God since, as we've already noted, he's speaking to his disciples who are already in the kingdom. They already have a legal righteousness credited to them by faith. They're already justified – they've already been declared right with God the Judge.
  - ▶ Now even though I don't think this aspect of righteousness is being referenced in the Sermon, **I want to be clear that a legal righteousness is something you have to hunger for if you want to be a Christian**, if you want to be saved from the punishment your sins deserve. To become a Christian, you have to admit your spiritual poverty – that you have no righteousness to commend yourself before God. And then you have to receive God's gift of righteousness by receiving Christ himself – you enter into a personal, intimate, saving union with Christ. Christ's righteousness will then be your righteousness. So if you're not yet a Christian, hunger for that. That legal righteousness in the eyes of God is essential for your salvation.
  
- ❖ But as I've explained, Jesus is preaching to his disciples, so he's not specifically referring to a legal righteousness. There's another usage of the word. Second, it could refer to **a moral righteousness** in relation to God's will. That's the primary way Matthew's Gospel is going to use the term. **To be righteous means to be living in conformity to the will of God.**
  - ▶ Later on in chapter 5, starting in v20, Jesus is going to contrast the righteousness of his disciples with that of the scribes and Pharisees. And it becomes clear that he's talking about a moral righteousness that marks a person's life. **But his whole point is that the righteousness his disciples need to be hungering for is ultimately a moral righteousness of the heart.** Living in conformity to God's will certainly involves right actions, but it starts with a right heart and right motives.

- ❖ So when the beatitude says blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, **it means blessed are those who want, in their heart of hearts, to do the will of God, to observe all that Jesus has commanded.** Who in their hearts harbor no anger or bitterness towards others (vv21-26). Who refuse to indulge in lust and commit adultery in their hearts (vv27-30). Who keep their oaths, especially their marriage oath/covenant (vv31-37). Who refuse to retaliate against their offenders but instead love their enemies and pray for them (vv38-48). That's the kind of righteousness a Christian hungers for – a moral righteousness that starts in our hearts and translates into our actions.
  
- ❖ But there's a third way that *righteousness* is used in the Bible. It could be a personal legal righteousness in God's eyes or a personal moral righteousness in conformity to God's will, or third, **a public social righteousness** in God's world. We are to hunger for God's righteousness not just to fill our own lives – but to fill the world and every life in it. We want to see righteousness (justice) done on this earth.
  - ▶ Listen to the prophet Isaiah. In chapter 26:9, he says (referring to the LORD), "*My soul yearns for you in the night; my spirit within me earnestly seeks you.*" That's the kind of hunger and thirst Jesus is talking about. But Isaiah continues. His soul is yearning for God, his spirit is earnestly seeking him, "*For when your judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world learn righteousness.*" So even in his personal hungering for the LORD, there is a corporate, social dimension to it.
  
- ❖ Sadly this is a hunger lacking among many Christians today. **I think we are rightly criticized when our hunger for righteousness gets too individualized and privatized.** When our Christianity is just about our own piety, and we divorce that personal pursuit from a corporate concern for unrighteousness in society, in the culture, in the world.
  - ▶ I understand this could be a generational difference. Depending on your age, you might lean one way more than the other. **I think it's a fair generalization to say that older evangelicals usually give more attention to the pursuit of a personal moral righteousness compared to younger evangelicals.** Older believers are rightly appalled by the laxity of younger evangelicals in the pursuit of personal holiness. They can be far too conformed to the standards of this world.
    - **But then younger evangelicals tend to be much more sensitive to social injustices and give more attention to the pursuit of a public righteousness.** And they get frustrated by older believers who accuse them of being too radical or politicized, and who only seem to care about what goes on in their own lives or their family or the church.
  
- ❖ I think these differences are present among us. And I think we can (and should) be convicting each other, correcting each other, and learning from each other. Because we're called to hunger and thirst for both – a moral *and* social righteousness. **This is yet another reason why we need to work hard to bring down generational barriers in our congregation.**

- ❖ **I want to directly challenge our older members to take the initiative to reach out to younger members.** There is so much that younger believers can learn from you – your spiritual discipline, your pursuit of holiness, your example of godliness. Pass that on.
  - ▶ And at the same time, be open to learn from those younger brothers and sisters. Let them inspire you toward great social concern and action. Join them the next time they volunteer at that shelter or serve in that disadvantaged school, or prayer walk that neighborhood or apartments. There is so much we can learn from each other.
  
- ❖ **Together I believe we'll be blessed – not by going hard after blessedness itself – but by going hard after righteousness.** It's like what Jesus says later in chapter 6:33. If you're so worried and anxious about things, don't seek after them. Seek first the kingdom of God and his *righteousness* and all those things will be added to you.
  - ▶ So if you're feeling stale in your walk or dissatisfied in your faith, then this is what you have to do: **Don't focus on the lack of blessings in your life; focus on the pursuit of righteousness in your life and the lives of others.** Hunger and thirst after righteousness in all its forms, and do this together with other believers different than yourself. Let God use them to balance you out and sharpen your rough edges.

### **The Significance of our Spiritual Hunger**

- ❖ We've looked at the object of our spiritual hunger, now let's consider its significance. This is our second point. We're going to ask if it was significant for Jesus to use the verbs hunger and thirst. Why didn't he say "Blessed are those who are righteous"? **Normally you'd call the ones who have found what they're looking for blessed – not the ones still looking.**
  - ▶ Consider the literally starving man. You wouldn't call him blessed if his stomach is still growling. You'd only call him blessed once he finally had his fill to eat. That makes sense to us. So that's why it's strange that simply hungering and thirsting for righteousness is enough to call you blessed.
  
- ❖ There must be something significant about simply having the appetite for righteousness. I'd explain it like this: **Having a hunger for righteousness implies that your appetite has changed – where now God's righteousness actually tastes sweet to you.** You actually like being righteous and behaving righteously. And your heart's desire is to see God's righteousness done on this earth as it is in heaven.
  - ▶ That's huge. Something hugely significant must have occurred in your life for you to feel this way. Because left to yourself, you never would. **In your own flesh, you wouldn't have an appetite for righteousness.**
  
- ❖ **I think about my wife and how she hates cilantro.** With a passion. She can detect if there's even just one leaf of cilantro in her pho. She'll go on a mission to search it out and remove it. That's how much she hates it. I think it would take a miracle for her to eat cilantro. If ever I were to witness her asking the waitress at the pho shop for more cilantro for her soup, I would be speechless. Some kind of radical transformation must have taken place. She must be a new woman. I must have a new wife.

- ❖ **Friends, I would conclude the same thing if you were to tell me that you now hunger and thirst for righteousness.** A miracle must have occurred, a radical transformation. You must be a new person. You must have been born again.
  - ▶ Because in your flesh, apart from Christ, you'd have no appetite for righteousness. In fact, it would disgust you. So this is a great test to know whether or not you've been born again. **If you can genuine detect an appetite for righteousness in your soul, then you should be strongly encouraged.** God has been (and still is) at work in you.
  
- ❖ Here's another way of looking at it. **A new taste for righteousness would imply a distaste for unrighteousness and sin.** Before I was a Christian, sin was sweet to me. But after becoming a Christian, sin has begun to lose its sweetness, and the more I grow and mature in faith, sin leaves more of a bitter taste in my mouth.
  - ▶ **I think about how my own tolerance for sweets has changed the older I've grown.** The other day we were at the mall, and I had this random craving for a milkshake. I say *random* because these days I never order a milkshake. Now I loved them when I was younger, and I think I was drawn by the memory of my youthful enjoyment. So I ordered a milkshake. But after the first sip I was done. It was way too sweet for me. I couldn't finish it. I eventually threw away a practically full cup. I was not the same person as I was before. **My tastebuds have changed.**
  
- ❖ **I think that's the same way a Christian reacts to sin and unrighteousness.** We're tempted to indulge. We're drawn by the memory of former pleasures. It tasted so good back then. But soon after we indulge – after we take a bite or sip of sin – we're disgusted. At the sin. At the unrighteousness. At ourselves for acting against our nature – our new regenerate nature.
  - ▶ So the obvious question we have to ask ourselves is this: How does unrighteousness taste to me? **Do I find sin to still be just as sweet as it's always been or is it growing bitter to me?** This is another way of testing yourself to see whether you're in the faith (2 Cor. 13:5).
  
- ❖ **Just because you're not committing the same sins as you once did before, that's no sign of being born again.** Okay so you no longer use foul language, you're no longer involved in that sexually immoral relationship, you no longer visit those sites or watch those shows, you no longer fight with that family member, you no longer care about what that girl does or why she says about you – **congratulations, you've achieved the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees (5:20).** You've kept yourself from sinning. But if your spiritual appetite hasn't changed, then it's not enough. Your righteousness has to exceed beyond behavioral change. **It has to come from the heart, from an entirely new heart.** You need to be born again.
  - ▶ But now if your soul does hunger and thirst for righteousness, if your appetite has changed, and sin is starting to taste more and more bitter, if it's starting to disgust you – then praise God! **That means you're blessed, and all the blessings of the Beatitudes apply to you.** Yours is the kingdom. You shall be comforted. You shall inherit the earth. You shall be satisfied.

## The Fulfillment of our Spiritual Hunger

- ❖ Let's conclude by considering that promise – the promise of satisfaction. "*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they shall be satisfied.*" In what sense is that true? How will we be satisfied? And is Jesus talking about a satisfaction in the present or only one day in the future?
- ❖ **First, notice how "be satisfied" is a passive verb, so that implies the satisfaction is ultimately not something we *achieve* but something we *receive*.** That ties in with our previous point. You bring the hunger and God does the satisfying. You bring the emptiness; God does the filling. That's the gospel of grace.
- ❖ **Now I think there definitely is a future element to this promise of satisfaction. There is finality. One day you will be sated.** You will hunger and thirst for righteousness no more. Because, on that day, you will be fully righteous, glorified in the flesh, perfectly conformed to the image of the Son. On that day when he returns, we shall be like him because we shall see him as he is (1 Jn. 3:2). With unveiled faces we shall behold the glory of the Lord and be transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another (2 Cor. 3:18).
  - ▶ **And on a societal level, we can look forward to a new heavens and a new earth.** Our hunger for a world where righteousness and justice fill the earth and all remnants of wickedness, suffering, and pain are done away with for good – that hunger for societal righteousness will finally be satisfied.
- ❖ So definitely at his second coming, there will be satisfaction. **But I think there's also a present sense in which the Christian's hunger for righteousness is satisfied right now.** Jesus 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.*" And I don't think he just meant one day in the future. **No, he's promising to satisfy your hunger and quench your thirst, the moment you come to him and believe in him.**
  - ▶ But at the same time, in another sense, the Christian will persist to hunger and thirst for righteousness until we see Jesus face to face. I know it sounds like I'm contradicting myself, but this is one of the paradoxes of the Christian life. **The Christian is constantly hungering for more righteousness while at the same time he's full.** This is how Lloyd-Jones put it, "You see the Christian is one who at the same time is hungering and thirsting and yet he is filled. And the more he is filled the more he hungers and thirsts."
- ❖ **It's a cycle – the holier you get the hungrier you are for more.** Just picture a spout that's pouring out living water. You're thirsting for this water. So you take your cup and you fill it up and it gets full. But the spout stays open and the water keeps flowing. And so you pour the contents into a larger cup and you keep filling. And once it gets to the top, you pour it into an even larger cup and you keep going. And on and on you go. You're always full but you're constantly being filled with more. That's what it's like.

- ▶ **When you come to Jesus and believe in him, God fills you up with righteousness to the brim, but at the same time he increases your capacity for more.** So the holier you get, the more you realize you have so much more to grow. And so the hunger and thirst persists. And as you continue pursuing righteousness, he'll satisfy you. But only to increase your cup again and make you hunger and thirst for more!
- ❖ Paul lived out this paradox. That's how he could write to Timothy and say, "*I know whom I have believed*" (2 Tim. 1:12), and yet to the Philippians he tells them how much he longs, "*to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death*" (Phil. 3:10). **Paul could say he knows Christ, and at the same time say he still longs to know Christ.** He's full and yet he longs to be filled.
  - ▶ Get used to this, Christian. Get used to hungering and thirsting. That's part of the normal Christian life. This fourth beatitude is not just describing our pre-Christian experience before we're satisfied coming to Christ. Just as being poor in spirit or mourning is not just describing us pre-conversion. This fourth beatitude, along with the rest, describes the Christian life on the earth until the kingdom comes in fullness.
- ❖ So let me end with the question I posed at the beginning: **What are you hungry for in life? What are you thirsting after?** I know there are so many distractions pulling our appetite in different directions, and that leaves us anxious and troubled by many things. But only one thing is necessary.
  - ▶ **Church, let's make today the day we recommit ourselves to seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.** Whatever unfulfilled desire you brought with you this morning, whatever you're hungering for – if it's not God and his righteousness – then put it aside. If you don't, then just know you won't be satisfied and you won't experience God's blessing. But if you do, then this promise is for you: *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.*