

## Matthew 5:6. Thirsting for righteousness

---

### The Beatitudes

The Sermon on the Mount, and the beatitudes, are among Jesus' best known sayings – even admired by those who are not Christians. "If only people would live like this, the world would be a better place."

But Jesus is not just laying down a moral code, he is teaching about the Kingdom (see vv. 3, 10). The "kingdom of heaven" is another term for "the kingdom of God" (compare, for instance, Matthew 13:11 and Luke 8:10). This kingdom is not something far off and far away. With the coming of Jesus Christ (King Jesus), God's kingdom has invaded this world and *is* invading this world. He taught his disciples to pray that God's kingdom might come so that God's will might be done on earth as it is in heaven.

The beatitudes therefore are not a new moral code: they describe the character of the life that is to mark children of the kingdom; those who belong to follow the king. The blessings spoken of are not earned by our moral conduct but are simply the blessings of living under his dominion or kingdom.

Matthew 5:6 reads, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."

### Hunger and Thirst

Jesus is not speaking here of a casual desire. In the context of the first century Middle East, to speak of hunger and thirst would be to speak of desperate need. It speaks of a desire which pushes out all other desires and considerations – of a desire that needs to be satisfied at all costs or else I will die!

Jesus is speaking of what is to be the overriding concern of his people: the passion of their hearts. It is that which they seek after with all their energy and with every fibre of their being. They must have righteousness at all costs: "Give me righteousness or I will die!" Moreover, it is a strong conviction not only that this is something we *must* have, but also that it is something we do not have in ourselves, nor can we furnish it from ourselves. We hunger and thirst to obtain it from another.

But what is this righteousness of which Jesus speaks here?

#### 1. It is an overwhelming desire for Christ himself

The Old Testament Scriptures tell us that righteousness is a characteristic of God himself – this is where we can see righteousness (see, for instance Ps 7:9, 11, 17). God is righteous: he is absolutely upright; there is no wrong in him or fault in him; there is nothing untrue, deceitful or crooked in him.

Righteousness is one of the key characteristics of his kingdom (see Ps 89:14). It marks his rule and his judgments.

But we live in a world marked by unrighteousness and injustice; a world that has gone tragically wrong. And we ourselves are part of this world that has gone tragically wrong. Hence we find the frequent cry in the Old Testament for God to come and judge the world in righteousness: for him to come and display his righteousness and his righteous rule in putting the world to rights.

And this is what God has done in Jesus! Jesus is the one in whom the righteousness of God has been revealed (Romans 1:17a). He is the Lord our righteousness (1 Corinthians 1:30).

God's righteousness is displayed particularly in Jesus' death. Here a guilty world is brought to judgment and a new and righteous creation is brought to birth (see Romans 3:21, 25-26). Here, in the words of Ps 85:10 (a kingdom psalm), "righteousness and peace kiss each other."

Since Jesus is the one in whom God's righteousness is displayed, to desire righteousness is to desire Christ. It is to want more of him and of his kingdom (see Romans 14:17). It is to desire to know him and the power of his resurrection, even though it will mean sharing in his sufferings (Philippians 3:10).

Following on from this ...

## **2. It is a desire to be like Christ**

To thirst after righteousness is to thirst after Christ-likeness – that he might be more fully formed in us.

Have you watched the Disney film, Jungle Book? In it, King Louie, king of the monkeys, sings to Mowgli: "I wanna be like you: I wanna walk like you, talk like you too." He has seen in Mowgli something that he is not but really wants to be. He has seen what it means to be human.

And this is our song too. We see in Jesus something that we were meant to be but are not. Here is what God meant human beings to be like – those who were created in his image. And we cry out to Jesus Christ, "I want to be like you: I want to walk like you; I want to talk like you." This is our longing.

Do you sometimes see someone of whom you think, "I wish I could be like him/her?" Did you hear Nigel Kennedy on the proms on 26<sup>th</sup> July, playing Elgar's violin concerto and then jazz and Jimmie Hendrix! Oh to be able to play the violin like that! But I don't want to be like him – like him in his dress, in his speech and in his behaviour.

But when I look at Jesus, there is no part of his character, life or behaviour which I do not want also to mark my own life. I see here the righteousness of God and I want this to be reflected in me – in every part of me. Is this really true of us? Think what it really means.

To hunger and thirst for righteousness is to long to be like Christ, like him in every way, as like him as it is possible for us to be. It is to thirst to be like him in our thinking – to have the mind of Christ. It is to thirst to be like him in our behaviour – following Christ. It is to thirst to be like him in our conversation – speaking always the words of Christ. It is to thirst to be like him in influence and effect – touching others with the presence and transforming power of the living God.

To hunger and thirst after righteousness is to want to be like Christ no matter what this may cost. It is the overwhelming conviction that I *must* be like him.

## **3. It is a passionate desire for the transformation of the world**

We live in a world marked by unrighteousness and injustice. If our hunger and thirst for righteousness is only for an improved personal spirituality it is selfish and un-Christ-like. A thirst for righteousness must extend to every part of the world in which we live.

Creation is groaning, longing for the day when it will be freed from corruption and vanity, when all creation will enjoy the glorious freedom of the children of God (see Romans 8:19-27). We who have come to trust in Christ have the firstfruits of the Spirit and groan along with a groaning creation. We long for its redemption and transformation. Our hunger and thirst for righteousness is more than personal, it is cosmic.

Jesus came to change the world – see how he announces his mission in Luke 4:18-19. He came to deal with all those evils that had invaded the world through sin and to restore creation to be all that God purposed for it to be. He came to establish his kingdom of righteousness – and he has called us to be involved in this task:

- Campaigning and working against injustice, violence and oppression – Oasis
- Working to alleviate and bring an end to poverty – Millennium goals, Micah challenge
- Labouring for the healing of disease – Malaria, HIV/AIDS, Mercy Ships
- Seeking to bring hope to those who live in despair – Hope 08

- Pushing back the oppression of false religion by making Christ known

We live in a world in crisis, ravaged by injustice, selfishness and greed; a world crying out for hope and for a future. We need to echo the cry of Amos, "Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream." (Amos 5:24). Do we reflect the compassion of Christ for a needy world or have we twisted the Gospel into a form of escapism?

### **And finally – we have the promise of hunger and thirst being satisfied**

The beatitudes end with a promise: those who hunger and thirst for righteousness *will be filled*.

We long for Christ, for more of Christ, and one day we will be in his presence for ever.

We long to be like Christ, and one day, "when he appears we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is." (1 John 3:2). This promise of perfect likeness to him in the future, far from allowing us simply to give up on holiness and wait for that day, spurs us on in seeking to be more like him now (1 Jn 3:3).

We long for this whole creation to be renewed, for there to be "a new heavens and a new earth, the home of righteousness" (2 Peter 3:13). And this prospect, far from allowing us simply to give up on this present world and wait for it to be replaced, spurs us on in prayer and action in seeking that it might be made now, more like the world that God intended it to be – more like it shall be on that day.

Jesus says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled." How hungry are you?

Peter Misselbrook – 3/8/2008