

Matthew 5:6. Thirsting for righteousness

I was recently reading a book which spoke of the need for Christians to pray blessing on their neighbours and on the schools and businesses in their neighbourhoods. Christians should be those from who blessing flowed out into the community.

I think that is very true. But it is important for us to realise first that we are the recipients of blessing – that God has blessed us and continues to bless us in the Lord Jesus Christ. The passage from the Bible which we have read this morning is one in which Jesus has much to say on the subject of blessings.

The Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes

The Sermon on the Mount and, in particular, the beatitudes, are among Jesus' best known sayings – even admired by those who are not Christians. They say things such as, "If only people would live like this, the world would be a better place." And, of course, they are right.

In his controversial book, *The God Delusion*, the strident atheist Richard Dawkins writes, "Jesus, if he existed . . . was surely one of the great ethical innovators of history. The Sermon on the Mount is way ahead of its time. His 'turn the other cheek' anticipated Gandhi and Martin Luther King by two thousand years." (p.283).

But to read these words as great moral teaching that can be separated from the truth about God and his purposes is to completely miss the point. 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. If you have any doubts about that, look at verse 10. You might argue in verse 9 that Jesus is laying down a moral principle that we should be peacemakers but you can hardly argue that in verse 10 Jesus is laying down a moral principle that we should be persecuted! No, the beatitudes describe the character of the life that is to mark children of the kingdom; those who belong to follow the king. They describe a life like that of Christ himself. And the blessings spoken of are not earned by our moral conduct but are the blessings that King Jesus pours out on his people, the blessings of living in his kingdom or under his reign.

In particular, I want us this morning to look at just one of these 'beatitudes', that is, pronouncements of blessing. Matthew 5:6 reads, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled [or satisfied]." I want us to look together at what this means.

Hunger and Thirst

In speaking of 'hunger and thirst' Jesus is not speaking here of a casual desire.

On Friday my wife usually collects the grandchildren from school and they came back to our house to play and have tea. Almost as soon as they get through the door they were saying that they are hungry and want something to eat. They will not be put off even though my wife is preparing tea for them in less than an hour. And if you do try to put them off they will cry, "We're starving!" But, of course, they are nothing of the kind.

Jesus is speaking these words to crowds in the context of the first century Middle East – in a dry and dusty land and to a people familiar with famine. Do you remember the incident between Jacob and his twin brother Esau recorded in Genesis 25. Esau had been out hunting, maybe out in the heat for many hours chasing game, and he came back to their tent to find Jacob making lentil stew. We read (in verses 29-34):

Esau ... said to Jacob, 'Quick, let me have some of that red stew! I'm famished!' ...

Jacob replied, 'First sell me your birthright.'

'Look, I am about to die,' Esau said. 'What good is the birthright to me?'

But Jacob said, 'Swear to me first.' So he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob.

Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and some lentil stew. He ate and drank, and then got up and left.

Esau was probably also exaggerating when he said, "I am about to die" but, in the climate the Middle East it was far closer to the truth. For Jesus to speak to the crowds of hunger and thirst would be to speak to them 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!

Hence Jesus is speaking of what is to be the overriding concern of his people: the passion of their hearts. This is that which they seek after with all their energy and with every fibre of their being. They – we – 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. 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. And righteousness is one of the key characteristics of his kingdom. Psalm 89:14 reads, "Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; love and faithfulness go before you." Righteousness 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). Jesus *is* the Lord our righteousness (1 Corinthians 1:30 "Christ Jesus ... has become for us ... our righteousness, holiness and redemption).

God's righteousness is displayed particularly in Jesus' death. Here a guilty world is brought to judgment and a new and righteous new 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, "The kingdom of God is ... righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."). It is to want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection, even though it will mean sharing in his sufferings (Philippians 3:10). It is a desire for Christ no matter the cost – "give me Christ or I shall die!"

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?" I love to listen to Nigel Kennedy playing Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. Oh to be able to play the violin like that! (O to be able to play the violin at all!) But I don't want to be like Nigel Kennedy – I don't want to be 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, to long to 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, a desire that drives us on to pursue holiness.

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.

¹⁸ 'The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

Jesus came to deal with all those evils that had invaded this world through sin. He came to restore God's creation to be all that he wanted 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 – contemporary slavery, human trafficking, child labour...

- Working to alleviate and bring an end to poverty – locally, such as through CAP (Christians Against Poverty) and Food Banks, and internationally by campaigning for fair trade
- Labouring for the healing of disease – Malaria, HIV/AIDS, or by supporting the work of Mercy Ships
- Seeking to bring hope to those who live in despair – refugees from warfare, poverty and oppression
- Pushing back the boundaries of false religion which holds people captive by telling them of Jesus and of the freedom he gives

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 pray earnestly for our world and 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?

Finally – we have the promise of hunger and thirst being satisfied

Like all the beatitudes, this one ends with a promise: those who hunger and thirst for righteousness *will be filled, will be satisfied*.

We long for Christ, for more of Christ, and one day we will be in his presence for ever and will see him face-to-face.

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). And this promise of perfect likeness to him in the future, far from allowing us simply to give up on holiness now and to wait for that day, spurs us on in seeking to be more like him now; "All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure." (1 Jn 3:3)

We long for this whole creation to be renewed and we are promised that when Christ returns there will be "a new heavens and a new earth, the home of righteousness" (2 Peter 3:13). And again, 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 when all things shall be made new.

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

How hungry are you?

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