

Alive in an Olympic-Sized Craving

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[0 : 00] I have good news for you today. Actually, Jesus has good news for you today. The Gospel writers tell us that Jesus came into the cities and towns of first century Palestine announcing good news.

And here it is. The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God has come near. The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God has come near.

It is time. It is time for the long-awaited future to break into the present. It is time for heaven to invade earth. Wonderful good news.

In Jesus, the kingdom of light is invading the kingdoms of darkness. In Jesus, the kingdom of justice is invading the kingdoms of oppression. In Jesus, the kingdom of life is invading and displacing the kingdoms of death.

Are we surprised then that Jesus would couple this announcement of good news with the call to repent and believe? Turn around, he says, and embrace this good news.

[1 : 11] What else can he say? It is time. God's new world order is breaking in. You've got to make a U-turn in the road and put your weight on me.

And when we do, something happens. A new kind of humanity begins to emerge in the city. The new kind of humanity Jesus is describing for us in the collection of sayings known as the Beatitudes.

I invite you this morning to focus on the fourth of the eight Beatitudes Jesus gives us. Matthew chapter 5 verse 6.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. In this fourth Beatitude, Jesus is drawing us into what will be the major theme of his famous Sermon on the Mount.

Indeed, in this fourth Beatitude, Jesus is drawing us into what is the major theme of being human.

Now, as I've suggested along the way in this series, whenever we focus on just one of the Beatitudes, we need to make sure that we hear and see all of them.

[2 : 28] So, again, we're going to read all the Beatitudes. Matthew chapter 5 verses 3 through 10. And here's how we're going to do it.

I will say the words, blessed are, and you will respond with the words, for they or for theirs. Okay? Ready?

Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the people. Blessed are the pure in heart.

Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness. Blessed are you.

[3 : 30] Holy zobosites. Blessed are the down for us. Will you now help us understand your words? And more than understand, will you help us actually live the reality they describe? For this we pray in your name. Amen.

Amen. Blessed, right on, in sync with the really real, are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they, and only they, will be satisfied. Now, right from the beginning, let's make sure that we're hearing Jesus clearly. Jesus is not saying in his fourth beatitude, blessed are those who feel righteous. Jesus is not saying in his fourth beatitude, blessed are those who are on their way to being righteous. He could say that, but in another context.

Jesus in his fourth beatitude is not even saying, blessed are those who are declared righteous. Something he could say later on in light of his finished work on the cross. What Jesus is saying is, blessed are those who knowingly unrighteous, hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they, and

they alone, will be satisfied. As I've been suggesting in this series thus far, the qualities Jesus blesses or congratulates in the beatitudes are not natural human qualities.

That is, we do not and cannot produce them. I cannot all of a sudden decide that I will be poor in spirit, or gentle, or pure in heart. I cannot all of a sudden decide, well, I think I'll hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Rather, the qualities that Jesus congratulates come into being by the life-giving power of his good news. They are what begin to emerge in individuals and communities when Jesus and his gospel get a hold of us.

[6 : 19] Jesus walks into our lives, calls us to follow him, and then causes his kingdom to break into our lives. And as a result, something happens. We find ourselves becoming poor in spirit.

We begin to mourn in a whole new way, and then we begin to hunger and thirst as never before. We begin to crave in a way we never craved.

In Jesus, Emmanuel, the with us God, we begin to taste God's new world order. And as a result, we become painfully aware of how far we have fallen from that new world order.

And then we begin to become aware of our helplessness and spiritual bankruptcy. And then, because of what we taste in Jesus, we hunger and thirst as never before.

We begin to crave with an Olympic-sized craving. Now, I need to be more precise at this point.

[7 : 20] I said that the qualities Jesus congratulates in the Beatitudes are not natural human qualities. What I mean is, they are not natural human qualities for humanity under the reign of sin.

I need to make this clarification because, as a matter of fact, we were originally created to long for righteousness. I've not yet said what righteousness is, but we were originally hardwired with an appetite for righteousness.

Sadly, sin entered the picture. Sadly, we gave in to the power of sin. And sadly, that natural human longing got twisted and distorted.

And in the mix, all other human hungers and thirsts got twisted and distorted. And they became more dominant. Now, more than righteousness, we crave food and drink, comfort and pleasure, wealth and fame.

Need I illustrate? In his fourth beatitude, Jesus is announcing really good news. He comes into our lives.

[8 : 38] He comes into our lives, enters into all of our hungers and thirsts, and restores in us the hunger and thirst for that for which we were created.

And in the process, he heals all these other natural hungers and thirsts, which by the power of sin have been twisted some into addictions.

The Savior of the world causes his kingdom to break into our worlds, and he rewires all of our hungers and thirsts.

And I love him for it. The hunger and thirst for righteousness does not displace the hunger and thirst for food and drink.

I mean, how could it be? We are physical creatures in a physical universe needing physical sustenance. However, the hunger and thirst for righteousness does heal the hunger and thirst for food and drink by delivering it from compulsiveness.

[9 : 40] The hunger and thirst for righteousness does not negate our hunger and thirst for sexual intimacy. But the hunger and thirst for righteousness does heal that deep desire by delivering it from obsession.

The hunger and thirst for righteousness does not kill our hunger and thirst for greatness. The hunger and thirst for greatness puts this quest for greatness into a healing place by delivering it from egocentricity.

Jesus comes and he reforms all our appetites. Blessed, in sync, are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they and they alone will be satisfied.

Okay. Now it is time to focus on the key word, the key word righteousness. You're going to hear me say it a gazillion times. What does this term mean?

There's no way to exaggerate its place in the biblical story. Everywhere you turn in the Bible you encounter this word righteousness.

[10 : 51] In Genesis, in Exodus, in Deuteronomy, big time. In the Psalms. Your righteousness, O Lord, endures forever. You will lead me in the paths of righteousness for your namesake.

Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne. The heavens declare your righteousness. Your righteousness, O Lord, is like the mighty mountains. We encounter this word in the Proverbs.

And in the prophets. And in the writings of the Apostle Paul. The Apostle Paul's great magnum opus. His letter to the Romans. His one sustained reflection on righteousness.

We encounter this word in our hymns and songs. And we encounter it in the teaching and preaching of Jesus. Everywhere. Everywhere. It turns out that the whole Sermon on the Mount is crafted around this word righteousness.

Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees. Beware of practicing your righteousness before others to be seen by them. Seek first the kingdom and righteousness of God.

[11:53] Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness. Righteousness. So what does it mean? Righteousness. What are we dealing with in this word?

In my mind, the person who has done the best job of unpacking this word is the Old Testament scholar Gerhard von Rott. In his book, Old Testament Theology, von Rott writes this.

Listen. There is absolutely no concept in the Bible with so central a significance for all relationships of human life as that of righteousness.

It is the standard not only for our relationship to God, but also for our relationship with fellow human beings, reaching right down to the most petty wranglings. Indeed, it is even the standard of our relationship to the animals and our relationship to the natural environment.

Now, as I read that paragraph about righteousness, did you hear the word relationship? He said it many times. That's because relationship is what righteousness is all about.

[13:02] Dr. von Rott argues that righteousness is not about living up to some principle or guideline. Rather, righteousness is about living up to the particular demands a relationship places on us.

Righteousness is about living in faithfulness to relationship. A spouse is righteous who lives up to the terms of the marriage covenant.

A citizen is righteous who lives up to the expectations of the civil order. Righteousness, therefore, means right relationship or right relatedness.

If I ever do a paraphrase of the Bible, that's how I'm going to render that word. Right relatedness.

The term righteousness is everywhere in the biblical story because the story is all about right relationships.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for right relationship, for right relatedness, for they shall be satisfied.

[14:16] Now, it is in this light that I think we are to understand God's gift of the Ten Commandments. His gift of the law. The Apostle Paul, who is the Apostle of Grace, refers to the Ten Commandments, to the law, as the law of righteousness.

Romans 9.21. Because the commandments are all about relationship. The commandments are not some arbitrary code of ethics that have been imposed on us.

Rather, the Ten Commandments are an exposition of the right relatedness, which flows out of a right relationship with the living God. Let me ask you a question.

What is the first line of the law? What is the first line of God's law? Many people will say the first line is, you shall have no other gods before me.

That's not the first line of the law. The first line is, I am Yahweh your God who took you out of bondage. The first line of God's law is the declaration of a relationship.

[15:25] I am your God. It's the language of covenant. God is saying, before I tell you anything else, I'm going to tell you that I've already established a relationship with you.

I'm your God and you are my people. And I want you to get that straight before I tell you anything. In the Ten Commandments, then, that follow the first line of the law, God is simply unfolding the nature of this divinely initiated right relatedness.

It is as though God says to us, look, I am your God. You are my people. Now that we've got that straight. You got it straight. Here is what our right relatedness is going to look like.

You will not have any other gods before me. No one or nothing else is going to get in the way between you and me. You're going to live by a different rhythm, by the sabbatical rhythm of time.

Working six days and resting one. You will honor your father and mother. You will not commit adultery. You will not covet. The commandments are not a list of do's and don'ts, which we must do

or not do in order to have a relationship with God.

[16 : 35] The law is simply a picture of the right relatedness brought into being by God's grace. Am I making sense? And have I lifted a burden off your shoulders?

Disobedience, then. Disobedience is so grievous. Not because it broke some law, some code, some violation of some ethical code.

That's not why disobedience is so grievous. Disobedience is so grievous because it is not taking a relationship seriously. Disobedience is so grievous.

Disobedience is so grievous.

the righteousness of scribes and Pharisees by realizing that the scribes and Pharisees missed the point. They thought of righteousness as consisting in external conformity to the letter of the law.

[18 : 24] And Jesus shows us that you can conform to the letter of the law and not be righteous at all. That you can conform to the letter of the law and not actually be in relationship the law is protecting.

Thus a woman could say to herself, I'm righteous toward my neighbor because I've not caused his blood to flow. Ignoring the fact that anger and words of insult are also damaging to the relationship.

A man could say to himself, I'm righteous before this woman because I've not slept with her.

Ignoring the issue of lustful fantasies by which he uses her for his own purposes also damaging the relationship.

For Jesus, righteousness of the kingdom goes beyond legality. Just because an action is legal does not make it righteous. Just because an attitude is culturally acceptable does not make it righteous.

Righteous means living in faithfulness to a relationship which means dealing with the other person in terms of honesty and mercy and grace and servanthood to which Jesus calls us in his teaching.

[19 : 39] So once more, righteousness is all about relational integrity and wholeness. A relational integrity and wholeness that literally encompasses the totality of life.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for such right relatedness. Now let me paint a picture of how big that is.

Scripture tells us that we were created for four basic relationships. Relationships that are constitutive of our being in the image of God. These four basic relationships are most clearly spelled out for us in the opening chapters of Genesis.

Genesis 1 and 2 to which we're going to turn in the fall. First, we were made for a relationship with the earth. We are physical, material, ecological creatures.

The word for man in Hebrew is Adam. The word for earth in Hebrew is Adamah. It's a way of saying that our welfare is intricately tied up with the welfare of the earth.

[20 : 49] Second, we were made for a relationship with other human beings. We are social creatures. None of us is whole in isolation. We were made for each other. The Hebrew for man is Ish.

The Hebrew for woman is Isha. We can't get along without each other. We don't get along with each other sometimes, but we can't get along without each other. We were made for fellowship with others.

Third, we are made for a relationship with the self. We are psychological creatures. The wonder is we were made in such a way that we could embrace ourselves as beloved without any shame or guilt.

Imagine that. And fourth, and most fundamentally, we were made for a relationship with the living God. We are spiritual creatures. We are made for a relationship that holds all these other relationships together.

You can see then that we were made for a holistic righteousness. A right relationship with the created environment.

[21 : 52] A right relationship with other human beings. A right relationship with the inner self. And a right relationship with the living God marked by trust and obedience and joy and love.

Now, we cannot read the biblical story very long without then encountering God's hunger and thirst. God's hunger and thirst for this complete right relatedness.

This also means that we can't read the story very long without also encountering grief. God's grief. God's grief. For God's good world is now marked profoundly by unrighteousness.

All because we turned our back on this relationship with the creator resulting in all of the other relationships unraveling. Blessed, blessed, blessed are those who like God hunger and thirst for a

full-orbed righteousness.

Now, in this beatitude, Jesus uses very intense verbs to describe this craving. William Barclay observes, The hunger which the fourth beatitude describes is no genteel hunger which could be satisfied with a mid-morning snack.

[23 : 15] The thirst of which it speaks is no thirst which could be slacked with a cup of coffee or an iced drink. It is the hunger of the person who is starving for food.

It is the thirst of a person who will die unless they drink. That's how intense these verbs are. Jesus is not blessing those who are mildly dissatisfied with themselves or with the world.

He's blessing those who, as my friend Dale Bruner puts it, cannot live unless they find righteousness. Blessed is the person who longs for righteousness as though his or her own life depended on it.

Now, why this intensity? Why this massive craving emerging in the souls of those who know the gospel? Because the gospel is all about righteousness.

The kingdom of God breaking into the world is all about right relatedness. The gospel is the good news that the righteous God, the God of all relationship, has not given up on his own hunger and thirst.

[24 : 23] The creator's intense passion that all these relationships work will not be thwarted. In Jesus, God enters into all the unrighteousness and begins to reconstruct this fourfold relational existence.

The apostle Paul tells the believers in Rome, Rome was the most livable city of the first century. He tells the believers in Rome, I'm not ashamed of the gospel.

And we ask, why are you not ashamed of the gospel, Paul? He answers, because the gospel is the power of God unto salvation, unto wholeness. And we say, why is the gospel the power of God unto wholeness?

And Paul says, because in the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed. Or more literally, the righteousness of God breaks through. The gospel is all about God righteousizing all our wrecked relationships.

In Jesus, God is at work repairing all our relationship, repairing the relationship with the earth, with one another, with the self, and with God.

[25 : 28] And the resurrection of Jesus, is God's guarantee to the world that He's going to finish the job. And that is why Jesus blesses those who crave righteousness.

They are craving what God craves. Congratulations, you lucky bums. You're alive. You're alive with a divine appetite. You're alive with the passion of God Himself.

Bless it. In sync are those who crave for a right relationship with the earth. In sync are those who crave with a right relationship with others, who seek reconciliation between individuals and groups and nations as though their life depended on it.

In sync are those who crave right relationship with the self, who crave an integrated self, and who are willing to open themselves and who are willing to open themselves.

In sync are those who crave a right relationship with God, who starve for the living God, who want to know God as though their life depended on it.

[26 : 38] Those who pray with a psalmist, Oh God, you are my God, earnestly do I seek you. My soul pants for you as a deer pants for the water brooks. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst, who cannot live unless they get this full orb'd righteousness.

They will be satisfied, says Jesus. Only they will be satisfied, says Jesus. No other satisfaction is promised but the satisfaction for the hunger and thirst for righteousness.

When? When will we be satisfied? Well, we should know by now in working through the Beatitudes there's going to be a then and a now. Then, on that day when the kingdom of God comes in all its fullness, on that day when God finishes this reconstruction job we will be satisfied.

But, because Jesus has already come and is already present, because his kingdom is already breaking into the world, there is a sense in which this hunger and thirst can be met every day.

Why? Because every day Jesus offers himself to us. Every day Jesus offers himself to us as the source and the embodiment of all this right relatedness.

[27 : 56] As he said to a thirsty woman by the well in Samaria, he says to us, ask of me and I will give you living water. As he said to those whose stomachs were filled but who were still profoundly hungry, he says to us, I'm the bread of life.

If you come to me you will not hunger. If you believe into me you will not thirst. As he said to those who had their fill of religion and were bone weary, he says to us, if you're thirsty come to me and drink and out of your innermost being there will flow rivers of living water.

We cannot come just once because when we come he awakens even deeper longings. He awakens deeper hunger and thirst for him.

The bread of life satisfies, right? And yet every bite we take makes us want to have more, right?

The living water quenches, right? But every sip we take makes us thirst for more.

Take heart. As George MacDonald once said, in things spiritual increasing desire is a sign that satisfaction is near.

[29 : 10] Well, do you see where we have come? It turns out that the hunger and thirst for righteousness is the hunger and thirst for righteousness himself.

Saint Augustine was right. All of our longings in the final analysis are longings for God. So much so that G.K.

Chesterton can say the man who is knocking at the door of a brothel is looking for God. He may not know it. But in looking to have his heart satisfied with that woman, he's really looking for God.

It's the same thing that happens in the supermarket when you're so weary and you're looking at all of those all that stuff on the counter. I was doing that yesterday and I heard him say, you're really looking for me.

Blessed are those who are going to die unless they find God. God. Rudyard Kipling, you know the name, famous British poet, known most for his book Jungle Book, youngest person ever to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, was gravely ill.

[30 : 30] And as he stood in his hospital bed, one of the nurses came by and said to him, what do you want? And Kipling responded, I want God.

We don't know how the nurse responded, but had she heard the fourth beatitude, she would have said to Kipling, blessed, you are going to be satisfied.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus, I love you for a number of reasons.

One of them is that you tell us who we are and you tell us what we ought to be. Thank you.

I would invite you to simply speak to the living God this morning and to say I want you.

[31 : 42] I want more of you. I want more of you.

I want all of you. I want all you want for the world. Maybe you're here today and for whatever reason are feeling numb, too weary to even hunger and thirst in this way.

So I encourage you to say dear God quicken this hunger and thirst that you bless.

this is the air I breathe. Your very presence living in me.

This is my daily bread. Your word spoken to me and I'm lost without you. I'm desperate for you.