

"Hunger for Righteousness"

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning, church. Would you turn with me to Matthew chapter 5? This summer we've been studying the Beatitudes, and we're going to continue that study this morning.

And the Beatitudes are Jesus' description of the character of God-centered, kingdom-centered disciples. This is what they're like, and that means that these Beatitudes are Jesus' description of what we've been calling a genuinely flourishing human life.

You see, for Jesus, the flourishing life and the life centered on God and God's kingdom are one and the same. So in the Beatitudes, Jesus is inviting us to the life that's truly worth living, the life with God and God's kingdom at its center.

And this morning, we're looking at the fourth Beatitude in Matthew chapter 5, verse 6. That's page 759 in the Pew Bible. In Matthew 5, 6, we read, Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they should be satisfied.

But I'm going to read the whole section of this part of Matthew so we get the context. And then we'll circle back to verse 6 as we explore the rest of our sermon this morning. So let me read Matthew 5, 1 through 12, and then I'll pray.

[1 : 19] Seeing the crowds, Jesus went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying, Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven. For so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. All right, let's pray together. Father, help us as we consider these beatitudes again today.

[2 : 24] And as we consider particularly this hungering, this thirsting after righteousness. By your Holy Spirit, make us those sort of people as we attend to your word.

Spirit, this morning, would you blow through our dry bones and cause us to come alive to your kingdom and above all to your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who is the true and only satisfaction for our souls.

In his name we pray. Amen. Well, I think it goes without saying that nearly everyone wants to be happy. Or better, we want to be, as the end of Matthew 5, 6 puts it, satisfied.

Isn't that what the life worth living should feel like? A deep and lasting satisfaction, a fullness. But the great tragedy is that many of us are seeking satisfaction but not finding it.

And this is true for those inside and outside the church. Outside the church, people seek all sorts of means to feel satisfied. Money, pleasure, success, power.

[3 : 34] But in seeking satisfaction in those things, the irony is, we end up feeling not filled but empty. Now inside the church, we can seek satisfaction in the same things, can't we?

We often fall to the same temptations as our neighbors, if we're honest. We seek money and pleasure and success and power. But in the church, on top of those things, we can seek satisfaction in spiritual experiences or in relationships.

But these things, too, also leave us feeling not full but empty. The spiritual experiences are fleeting. The relationships are never deep enough.

They always let us down. They never meet our needs. So Jesus' words in this beatitude come to us first as a diagnostic question, a soul question to examine ourselves.

What are you hungering for? What do you think will really satisfy you? What do you think will fill your emptiness? And is it working?

[4 : 43] You know, at times, sure, it feels like your life is a well-tuned bicycle, right? The wheels are turning.

The sun and the wind are blowing through your hair. You can almost just lift your feet from the pedals and roll along. But even in those rare moments, isn't there still a lingering sense that life must be more than this?

Isn't life more than just a self-centered pursuit of getting my needs met and living as long as we can at the corner of happy and healthy, as the Walgreens commercials used to say?

Do you remember those? But here Jesus isn't just trying to expose our faulty attempts at finding satisfaction.

He's also inviting us to redirect our desires to the true place where they can be met. Jesus is not merely a cynic pointing out the futility of human life.

[5 : 54] Jesus is our good shepherd who's come to lead us in the way that we should go to the green pastures and the still waters where we will find the filling our souls long for.

And where is that to be found? What should we hunger and thirst for? Jesus says, righteousness. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Now, righteousness is one of those rich biblical words that we must all come to know and love if we're to understand true biblical Christianity.

More than that, according to Jesus in this verse, knowing what righteousness is and hungering for it and thirsting for it is the only way to real satisfaction. So I want to spend most of our time considering what righteousness is and what it looks like to hunger and thirst for it.

So then, what is righteousness? Well, in Scripture, the word righteousness has three aspects or three meanings which are all relevant here in Matthew 5-6.

[7 : 17] And these three aspects are all interconnected. They're sort of like a prism with three sides. You know, you look through one side of a prism and you sort of see the other two, right? That's what these three meanings or aspects of righteousness are like.

To see one of them, you see the other two as well. They're interconnected and they're all relevant here in Matthew 5-6. But we're going to look at them one at a time so that we can get the fullness of what Jesus is saying.

So first then, to hunger and thirst for righteousness means that we must hunger and thirst for God's delivering righteousness.

In other words, we hunger and thirst for God's full future saving justice. Righteousness in this sense is something God is and something that God will do.

God will act to deliver his people, to end oppression and violence, and to restore peace and wholeness to his creation.

[8 : 21] God will save and God will judge. God will save and thirst for peace and thirst for peace and thirst for peace and thirst for peace. This is what all the prophets looked forward to. This was the vision that fueled their hope and perseverance through dark days when it seemed like all hope was lost.

Now, we could consider many passages from the prophets and from the Psalms, actually. You see it often, David talking about, God, save me in your righteousness. But one passage I think that captures it well from Isaiah is Isaiah chapter 11.

In this chapter, Isaiah speaks of the coming Messiah whose righteousness will judge evil, restore his people to safety, and heal the broken creation. If you want to turn there, it's page 539 in the Pew Bible.

I'm going to read the whole chapter just so we get a sense of this sweeping vision of what the prophets looked for and longed for when they spoke of God's righteousness, his justice to come.

So Isaiah 11, starting in verse 1. Verse 1.

[9 : 51] Verse 1.

Verse 1.

Verse 1.

Now, the prophet here is obviously speaking in rich, figurative language about this coming day when God's righteousness will be expressed in full.

And we see the different elements here in this passage. And we see the different elements here in this passage that just like God acted in delivering justice to save his people from Egypt and lead them home. So the prophet. So the prophet longed for the prophet longed for the prophet long, to put down the evil oppressors of God's people and God's creation, and lead all of his redeemed people, Jew and Gentile, into a healed creation where there was no more sin or sickness or death, where there was no more violence, where there was no more violence, where there was no more violence, where even the wolf could dwell with the lamb and a little child could lead them.

[12:42] Righteousness, right? Your will be done.

Your will be done. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. That's God's righteousness. The inbreaking of God's reign when he will at long last put the world to rights.

And friends, this is why Jesus came, to inaugurate this kingdom righteousness, to set it in motion. In Luke chapter 4, Jesus used the words of Isaiah 61 to describe his own ministry. In Isaiah 61, 1 through 4, we read, The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.

He sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and the opening of the prison to those who are bound, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, to grant those who mourn in Zion, to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, and the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit, that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified.

[14:28] They shall build up the ancient ruins. They shall raise up the former devastations. They shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.

So you see this picture that the Old Testament has of God's righteousness, of his delivering, healing, restoring, world-fixing justice that Jesus himself set in motion in his earthly ministry, and that will be fulfilled one day when he returns in glory.

Hunger and thirst for that, Jesus says. Jesus says. Jesus says. Jesus says. Friends, you were meant to be consumed by a vision so much greater and of so much more weight and importance and eternal significance than to merely live at the corner of happy and healthy for as long as you can manage it.

Jesus is saying. Jesus is saying. Break out of your small dreams and step into a longing that is as wide and as bold as the restorative reign of God's righteousness.

One person's heart who was captured by a hunger and thirst for God's righteousness was Ida Wells.

[15:58] I don't know if you know the story of Ida Wells. Here's how her story went as told in a book called Life Worth Living. Ida Wells was a young woman building a life in the midst of difficult circumstances.

She was born into slavery in Mississippi and freed as a child by the Emancipation Proclamation. And Wells lost her parents and her infant brother to a yellow fever epidemic when she was 16. To support herself and her surviving siblings, she took a job as a schoolteacher. And by her 20s, she had saved enough money to purchase one-third in an upstart newspaper called The Free Speech and to start a journalistic career.

Things were looking up for Ida. Until a horrifying but all-too-predictable injustice changed everything. On March 9, 1892, Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and William Henry Stewart were lynched just outside the Memphis city limits.

And this crime was personal for Wells. She was the godmother to Moss's daughter, Maureen. And the experience led Wells to see that she had actually been fed a lie.

[17:12] She wrote, It was different because Wells knew Moss and McDowell and Stewart.

And she knew they had committed no crime against white women. And suddenly she saw that lynching was really, as she wrote, an excuse to get rid of Negroes who were acquiring wealth and property and thus keep the race terrorized.

Few others in Ida Wells' time would speak this truth so clearly. And when Wells said it plainly in print, a mob of vigilantes ransacked the Office of Free Speech and left a note saying that anyone

trying to publish the paper again would be punished with death.

So Wells lost her paper. But she stood firm in her vocation to tell the truth about lynching to a world that didn't want to listen. Now, friends, what was it that fueled Ida B. Wells to do what she did with such courage?

Well, when you study her life a little more closely, you begin to realize that it was her tenacious faith in God and in God's righteousness.

[18 : 58] Her journals show us a woman who had a deep and resilient faith in the Lord Jesus, believing that God would fight for her no matter what was happening. Ida Wells' life was not lived at the corner of happy and healthy.

It was lived hungering and thirsting for God's delivering righteousness, His future justice that would put the world to rights. How about us today?

Where is God's coming righteousness inaugurated in Jesus calling you to speak and act? Where is the righteousness of God unmasking the lies of our day and age like it unmasked the world's lies for Ida Wells?

Perhaps God's righteousness is opening your eyes to the vulnerability of unborn children in a culture that would seek to dehumanize them with the rhetoric that we use.

Perhaps it's the vulnerability of migrants and refugees in a culture that seems equally hell-bent on dehumanizing them.

[20 : 13] Perhaps it's the vulnerability of children needing foster homes, or the vulnerability of our aging neighbors, or the vulnerability of women with unplanned pregnancies feeling scared and lost, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, Jesus says.

Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be satisfied. Now, this doesn't mean we will necessarily see all the change that we desire to see in the world.

In fact, we can be assured, we can be assured that we will not see all the change we desire to see in the world. The righteousness of God will only be fully complete when the Lord Jesus returns in glory, and all evil and injustice is excluded from His good creation once and for all.

But until that day, we hunger and thirst for it. We don't let Walgreens' vision of being happy and healthy lull us to sleep.

There's no satisfaction there. Only in hungering for righteousness. But as we hunger for this delivering kingdom righteousness of God, God's full and complete justice that's coming one day, we begin to realize that there's another aspect to this righteousness.

[21 : 37] For if we begin to hunger, if we begin to hunger for that justice to be complete in the world, we also begin to realize that it's we ourselves who need reformation just as badly as the world.

And this brings us to the second aspect of righteousness. To hunger and thirst for righteousness means that we must hunger and thirst for right living.

To hunger and thirst for our own actions and desires, to be in accord with God's righteous character and God's good commands. If the first aspect of righteousness points us to God's justice, the second aspect of righteousness points us to godly living.

And just as the first aspect of righteousness has as its center Jesus, God's just king, so this second aspect of righteousness has Jesus at the center as well.

For when we hunger and thirst for the righteousness of right living, we are hungering and thirsting for conformity to Jesus, the righteous one.

[22 : 54] And that is the hunger and thirst of every genuine Christian, to be like Christ. Growing up, you probably had a hero or two.

Maybe it was a sports figure that you longed to be like. So you studied her movements, you learned about her training routine, maybe even bought the products that they endorsed, right?

As a kid growing up in the 90s, you know, any kid growing up in the late 80s, early 90s, knew all about wanting to be like Mike, right? You know, so we all stuck out our tongues when we drove to the hoop, and we all spread our legs as we jumped for our layups.

You know, you see the same thing today as young kids are playing soccer, and they score a goal and yell, Sue! Right? They're imitating their heroes. But a small dream, isn't it?

It's a petty desire, compared to hungering and thirsting, to be like the one we see walk across the pages of the New Testament.

[24 : 04] Every earthly hero we discover sooner or later has feet of clay. But this one, in this one there was no guile, no secret motive, no selfish desire.

He was powerful enough to calm the raging seas, to speak with an authority that no one had ever known, and yet humble enough to wash his disciples' feet, and to receive the lowest of low and call them his friends.

Isn't this the great question our culture is asking again and again and again? Who do I want to be? What identity should I construct for myself?

Friend, there is one who is able to be the model for your humanity and leave you satisfied. The Lord Jesus Christ.

He is the truly human one. When you learn of his life in the pages of the New Testament, you are seeing the portrait of the full, flourishing life that you were meant to live.

[25 : 17] And wonder of wonders, this Jesus does not say that only the best and only the brightest can enter his school of living. No.

He says, anyone who comes to me, I will in no wise cast out. There are no tryouts in his school of life the doors wide open for you to come in.

But Christian, do you hunger for this? Do you thirst to be more like Jesus? Perhaps the reason you're feeling so empty, so lost, is because your hunger has been captured momentarily by a meal that can't really satisfy.

You thought a relationship could do it. You thought a new job could do it. You thought a new city could do it, but the hunger remains. Hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Hunger to become like Jesus. Thirst for conformity to Christ. hunger and thirst to be transformed into his image in increasing measure.

[26 : 39] I wonder, is there an area of your life right now that you know falls short of his ways or his words?

Perhaps you're stuck in an addiction and you need help. Friend, if that's you, this is the place for you. We're all sinners needing redemption and needing help.

And if you're stuck, come talk to me or talk to Alex at the door. We can connect you with fellow brothers or sisters who can help. Change is possible. It's not easy, but it's real.

You can find a new satisfaction in the arms of Christ. Perhaps for you it's not an addiction. Perhaps it's a character trait that you want to see more of in your life or it's an attitude or an action that you want to see less or more of in your life.

The Holy Spirit maybe right now is impressing something on you. Friend, don't let that desire go. Hunger for it. Thirst for it. Pray for it.

[27 : 50] Share that desire with trusted friends. Study it in the pages of Scripture and in the life of Jesus most of all. Think of ways that you can be cooperating with the Holy Spirit and the means of grace to see that virtue, to see that action develop more and more in your life.

Your humanity, brother, sister, is a beautiful thing. Christ became flesh to redeem your whole life. So don't hunger or thirst for anything less than righteousness. Righteousness in every area of life.

Of course, we won't see this work of ongoing growth and righteousness completed in this life.

We'll never reach sinless perfection, so we'll always be hungering and thirsting. But we will also know satisfaction. We can know a closer walk with Christ and a closer likeness to Him.

And when we see Him on the last day, we'll be like Him because we'll see Him as He is. God promises that Jesus will complete the good work He's begun and that will be eternal satisfaction.

[29 : 08] But there's one final aspect to this hungering and thirsting for righteousness. The first aspect was God's saving righteousness, His world-righting justice.

But our hunger for that sort of righteousness drove us to a hunger for personal righteousness because we can't just hunger for God's righteousness in the world and not at the same time hunger for God's righteousness in us in our personal daily likeness to Christ, the righteous one.

But this hunger for personal righteousness, it drives us to yet another hunger. For as we hunger for personal righteousness, we realize that our progress in righteousness will never be enough.

even as the Holy Spirit conforms us more and more into the image of Christ, we know that we're still lacking, that we're still poor in spirit.

You know, the experience of all the saints throughout church history has been like this. The closer they get to Christ, seemingly more holy and Christ-like they become, the more they understand their deep sinfulness and their unrighteousness.

[30 : 26] At the age of 21, David Brainerd came to see the kind of awesome worthiness of God and God's kingdom. Two months before entering Yale to train for the ministry, Brainerd wrote, the Lord I trust brought me to a hearty desire to exalt Him, to set Him on the throne and to seek first His kingdom.

That is principally and ultimately to aim at His honor and glory as the King and Sovereign of the universe. He says, I felt myself in a new world. It was a conversion experience for Brainerd and his zeal for the Lord only grew.

While at Yale, the Great Awakening was taking hold and Brainerd's love for Christ kept burning hot. It burned so hot, in fact, that he was expelled from Yale in 1742.

He was kicked out for being overheard as saying that one of the Tudors, Chauncey Wittlesey, had no more grace than a chair. And he wondered why the rector of Yale did not drop down dead for finding students for their evangelical zeal.

So that was Brainerd in his youth. So Brainerd left Yale and became a missionary to Native Americans. First, the Housatonic Indians about 20 miles northwest of Stockbridge, Massachusetts.

[31 : 47] And then among Native Americans in New Jersey and Pennsylvania along the Delaware River. Tragically, Brainerd's life would be cut short. He contracted tuberculosis and eventually died at the house of Jonathan Edwards back in Stockbridge, Massachusetts in 1747, only five years after leaving Yale.

Now, surely, for someone whose life burned that bright for the gospel, there would be just an overwhelming, unrelenting sense of satisfaction, right?

After all, what a great example Brainerd is of hungering and thirsting after righteousness. Brainerd loved the Lord Jesus. He laid down his life as a missionary, preaching the gospel, loving the lost, planting churches, aspiring for God's kingdom and righteousness.

But yet, the same Brainerd would also write in his diary entries such as these. In preparing to go to the Konomic Indians, about halfway between Stockbridge and Albany, Brainerd said on November 27, 1742, Surely I may well love all my brethren, for none of them all is so vile as I.

Whatever they do outwardly, yet it seems to me none is conscious of so much guilt before God. Oh, my leanness, my barrenness, my carnality and past bitterness and want of a gospel temper.

[33 : 24] These things oppress my soul. I rode from New York 30 miles to White Plains and most of the way continued lifting up my heart to God for mercy and purifying grace and spent the evening much dejected in spirit.

How could that be? Was Brainerd just a bit morose, a bit too introspective?

Did he suffer from a bit of depression perhaps? Well, maybe. But there's truth in what Brainerd saw too, you know.

Like the Apostle Paul, Brainerd knew what it was like to say, I am the chief of sinners. And the more we hunger for personal righteousness, the more we will see that too.

We'll be like the tax collector in Jesus' parable who goes up to the temple beating his breast saying, Lord, be merciful to me, the sinner. Now, where does this leave us?

[34 : 32] It leaves us hungering and thirsting for the final and the most surprising aspect of biblical righteousness. For this third aspect is not the kind of final saving justice of God and his in-breaking reign.

This righteousness is not the ongoing personal holiness or Christ-likeness that God works in us through his spirit. This righteousness is the gift of what Scripture calls justification, the righteousness that is credited to us simply through faith in Jesus Christ.

You see, Jesus didn't just live the model human life, the life worth living. No, much more than that, Jesus Christ lived the only truly worthy life.

The life he lived on earth before the Father was the life you and I were meant to live but did not. And the death he died on the cross was the death you and I deserve to die because of our great sin.

And everyone who comes to admit that their own righteousness cannot save them and who come to trust instead in Christ's person and work on their behalf, they are declared right.

[35 : 57] They're justified freely by grace. God, you see, credits the righteousness of Christ to their account and they're fully accepted not on the basis of their works but solely on the basis of Christ to whom they are united by faith.

hunger and thirst for that righteousness. The righteousness that fills your deepest hunger because your deepest hunger, friend, is to be in a right relationship with God.

Why do you seek satisfaction in money, in relationships, in power, in success? Why do you seek satisfaction in those things when you know they don't work? Why does your life feel like an endless search for something you can't find?

Because you were created to be gods and gods alone and sin has separated you from that God. But the beauty of Christianity and what sets it apart from all other religions is that in Christianity the triune God of love, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit planned for eternity to provide you the very thing that was required, a perfect righteousness so that you could spend eternity reconciled to Him, living in His presence and be satisfied.

God the Son became flesh. He lived and died in love for you so that you could be credited His righteousness not by works but by faith alone. And if you hunger and thirst for that gift of righteousness, you will be satisfied.

[37 : 59] As the prophet Isaiah wrote, come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters and he who has no money, come, buy and eat. Come, buy milk and wine without money and without price.

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Friends, Christ has accomplished everything we need to be accepted as righteous before God so we can come without money and we can eat and we can come without payment and we can drink and we can be satisfied.

And from that place, from that place of deep security in the gift of righteousness in Christ, purchased by His own death for us, in that place, we have a settled place now from which our hunger for personal righteousness and our hunger for God's ultimate justice can grow.

You see, only if you know this last sort of righteousness, the free gift of righteousness for sinners, only then can you know peace when your personal righteousness falls short, right?

And it's only then that you can know humility when your personal righteousness seems to be growing. Knowing that gift of righteousness, in other words, will keep you from becoming self-righteous even as you grow in Christlikeness.

[39 : 41] And it's only when you know the grace of God's justifying righteousness, the gift of righteousness, that you can hunger and thirst for His ultimate justice and hunger and thirst for it rightly in a fallen world because a right hunger for God's ultimate justice also includes a love for our enemies.

Our hunger includes a desire that those who work evil would come to repentance and know God's grace just as we who were once evil have come to know God's grace.

You see, without justifying grace, your longing for justice will turn cold and it will become violence.

So justifying righteousness puts everything else in its proper place.

And it ultimately puts our hunger in the proper place. for when we hunger for this justifying righteousness, this third aspect of righteousness, what we're ultimately hungering for is Christ Himself.

And it's in union with Christ, personal, close union with Him, that though we may be hungry and though we may be thirsty, and even though He calls us to take up our cross and follow Him, it's in union with Christ that we will always be satisfied.

[41 : 17] Let's pray together. Lord Jesus, Lord Jesus, work by Your Spirit to make us a people who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

and would we know what it means to be satisfied in You. Amen.