

Hungry and Thirsty People

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“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.”

MATTHEW 5:6 NASB

I was flying to England last summer when my seat partner and I struck up a conversation. Our conversation soon turned to the Gospel. My seat partner was not a Christian and told me quite plainly that his view of Jesus was not very high. While many would at least grant that Jesus was a good moral teacher, my friend disagreed. Citing Jesus’ well-known statement in the Sermon on the Mount, my friend stated, “I think Jesus was wrong; after all, the meek certainly do not inherit the earth.”

What my friend misunderstood, however, is that the Beatitudes are not general “platitudes” that are describing the world as a whole. No, the Beatitudes are descriptions of the Christian man and woman. This can be seen in the promises that are given in the Beatitudes. In the first beatitude, for example, it is promised that the poor in spirit will inherit the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:3). Who inherits the kingdom of heaven? Followers of Jesus. In the seventh beatitude we read that the peacemakers shall be called sons of God (Matt. 5:9). Who are the sons and daughters of God? Those who follow Jesus. The Beatitudes, then, are descriptions of the Christian person, and as we read through them we need to recognize that Jesus is giving us a profile of what our lives, as His followers, are to look like. This in turn has significant implications.

In the fourth beatitude (Matt. 5:6), Jesus says that you and I are to be hungry and thirsty people. When do you hunger for food? When your stomach is empty and your body needs sustenance. When do you thirst? When your body is in need of drink. Hunger and thirst are need-based: when our bodies need food, we hunger; when our bodies need drink, we thirst. Here Jesus says that we are to hunger and thirst for righteousness. What is the implication? It is simply this: we have a need for righteousness. Christian people, Jesus says, are those who are constantly aware that they are not holy in themselves and they are not righteous in themselves. Christian people, Jesus says, are those who recognize that when it comes to righteousness, they are in such need that they hunger and thirst for it.

The glory of the Gospel is that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be satisfied. When we are aware of our own lack of righteousness, we are driven to Jesus to ask for His righteousness. When we are aware that we are not righteous in and of ourselves, we run to Jesus and ask him to forgive our unrighteousness, to cleanse us, and to clothe us with His perfect righteousness. Jesus delights to answer such prayers, and the result is what theologians call justification: all our sins are forgiven and we are seen in God’s eyes to have the same righteousness that Jesus has. This is the glory of the Gospel.

The paradox of the Gospel is that we must not forget our hunger and thirst even after it has been satisfied! That is to say, we must never forget that we have no righteousness in and of ourselves and that it is for this

very reason that we must have the righteousness of Jesus. If we do forget this – if we forget our emptiness and poverty of spirit in and of ourselves – we can begin to depend upon our own righteousness as the source of satisfying our spiritual need. This is an age-old problem and one that Jesus himself sternly warns us about!

In Luke 18 Jesus tells the parable of two people going to pray. Not surprisingly – at least not surprisingly for Jesus' day – these two people go to the temple to pray. The first of them is the type of person you would expect in the temple: he is a Pharisee, a very pious and religious Jew who is very concerned to keep the commands of God. The second individual is not the type you would expect in the temple: he is a tax collector, a person who was especially abhorred in Jesus' day because of the blatant sinfulness of his life. He was certainly not a person that you expected to see in the temple praying. Nonetheless, this tax collector goes to the temple to pray at the same time as the Pharisee.

Now what we often miss is that Jesus is setting up a very strong contrast by describing a Pharisee and a tax collector. The contrast does not seem as strong to you and me because when we hear the word "Pharisee" we immediately have a very bad connotation in our minds: we think of a legalist, a hypocrite. In our minds, the Pharisee and the tax collector are both bad guys! But in Jesus' day the contrast was severe. To Jesus' hearers he is telling a story about two people from the opposite ends of the spectrum: one holy, one unholy; one righteous, the other sinful. There would be no question to the listeners present that day that the Pharisee is the good guy in the story and the tax collector is the bad guy.

This is in fact confirmed as we hear the prayers of each of these men: "The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector.

I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get'" (Lk. 18:11-12). In his eyes, he is indeed the good guy: unlike others, he does not swindle people, he does no injustice to people, he does not commit adultery, and he is certainly not like this tax collector. In fact, he goes beyond what the Old Testament requires of him: it requires him to fast once a year; he fasts twice a week. That's 103 times more than necessary!

By way of contrast, the tax collector would not even lift his eyes to heaven. Beating his breast he cries out, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner!" In his eyes, he is indeed the bad guy in the story. He is so ashamed that he does not even raise his eyes to heaven; he stands a far distance off, not drawing too near the presence of the Lord. He is so desperately wicked and sinful that the only thing he can appeal to is something he can never earn: God's mercy.

And yet when Jesus finishes the story, there is only person who goes down to his house right with God and it is not the Pharisee. Jesus says that the tax collector, not the Pharisee, left the temple justified – considered righteous – before the Lord (v. 14). And why? Because only the tax collector was humble enough to acknowledge that he was a person in deep need. The Pharisee, you see, did not hunger because he had no sense of need. The Pharisee did not thirst because he had no sense of need. And he had no sense of need because his eyes were in the wrong place. The Pharisee did not lift his eyes to heaven when he prayed; he did not measure his righteousness by the standard of God's white-hot holiness. No, his eyes were on those around him. His standard of righteousness was fellow sinners and compared to them he thought he did pretty well. The Pharisee had come to the point of thinking that his own righteousness was sufficient to meet his spiritual need.

The tax collector, though – the one whom Jesus holds up as a model for you and me – is the one who saw that he had no righteousness in himself. The tax collector – the one Jesus implies we must emulate – is the one who cries out to God for mercy and help to meet his deep need for righteousness. The tax collector, and not the Pharisee, is the one who hungers and thirsts for righteousness because he is the one who is truly aware of his need. And though he was unwilling to lift his eyes to heaven, the tax collector is the one who was actually looking in the right place, for he was the one who saw that his own righteousness was insufficient when compared to that of the Lord.

Seven centuries before Jesus told this parable, we read of another man who also apparently went up into the temple. While there he had a vision of the Lord of hosts. And as this man – the prophet Isaiah – lifted up his eyes, and beheld the Lord sitting upon His throne, and heard the burning seraphim cry out in a thunderous voice, “Holy, holy, holy,” our brother Isaiah did not say, “Lord, I thank you that I am not like other men;” he did not say, “Lord, I pay tithes and fast.” No, he cried out, “Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips!” Like the tax collector, the prophet Isaiah had a keen sense of his deep need for righteousness, and he sensed this need because he was looking in the right place.

Brothers and sisters, we have come to Jesus because we know that in and of ourselves we are wicked and without any righteousness. We have come to Jesus because of our great need, a need that Jesus alone can meet. In His mercy, He has met this need and given us His righteousness. But may we never forget the hunger and thirst for righteousness that drives us to Jesus! May we never forget that our hunger and thirst are satisfied only by His righteousness and not our own! And may we, like the tax collector and like Isaiah, keep this sense of need fresh in our souls by making sure that we gaze often upon the righteousness and holiness of God himself!

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