

Those Who Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness

Matthew 5:6

Overview of the Beatitudes

Our study of the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-12) has shown us a three-fold structure. In each Beatitude, there is . . .

- (1) a statement of **condition** (“blessed”)
- (2) a statement about the **character** (or actions leading from that character) of those in that condition, and
- (3) the **cause** for that condition

	Condition	Character (or the action springing from their character)	Cause (“because”)
5:3	Blessed are	the poor in spirit	because theirs is the kingdom of heaven
5:4	Blessed are	those who mourn	because they shall be comforted
5:5	Blessed are	the meek	because they shall inherit the earth
5:6	Blessed are	those who hunger and thirst for righteousness	because they shall be satisfied
5:7	Blessed are	the merciful	because they shall receive mercy
5:8	Blessed are	the pure in heart	because they shall see God
5:9	Blessed are	the peacemakers	because they shall be called sons of God
5:10	Blessed are	those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake	because theirs is the kingdom of heaven

We find ourselves surprised by the contrast between “blessed” and the characteristic to follow. How can they be called blessed/flourishing who are poor in spirit, mourning, meek, etc? The answer comes in the latter part of each beatitude: *because* theirs is the kingdom of heaven, etc.

So our study of the fourth beatitude, begins with this puzzle: *How can Jesus say that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are blessed?* The answer comes as we discover the meaning of the three key ideas here: (1) righteousness, (2) what it means to hunger and thirst for it, and (3) what it means to be filled with it.

1. **Righteousness:** *What flourishing people crave*

Righteousness is a rich word with many shades of meaning, but a good place to begin is to say that righteousness is *the way God intends the world to be*. For people to *be* righteous, then, means to live as God originally created them to live, which includes relating to God as his holy character deserves; and to others in such a way as they, his image-bearers, deserve. Since God has given rules (the Ten Commandments, for example) to help us understand how he intends for us to live in this world, righteousness may be further defined as abiding perfectly by those rules.

2. **Hunger and thirsting:** *Why* flourishing people crave it

Humans naturally long for things to be fair—just, and righteous. From a very early age, we recognize when something isn't right. But to hunger and thirst for righteousness means even more: it means to recognize that we *ourselves* are not right, and to feel that if we are not made right, we will die, just as a starving person realizes he will die unless he has food.

Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness do so because they know and feel that they do not have within themselves the righteousness they need.

3. **Filled:** *How* flourishing people are satisfied with it

But hungering and thirsting seem to be very bad feelings to have. In fact, however, they are the very feelings we need in order to live. The real tragedy would be to feel hunger and thirst for something that did not exist. Just as food and drink exists to satisfy our hunger and thirst for physical survival, so a righteousness exists to satisfy our need for spiritual life—a righteousness that comes *outside* us, just as food comes from outside us (Romans 1:17).

This is the righteousness that God provides because of what Jesus has done for us on the cross. Jesus lived a life of complete righteousness, and died as if he were unrighteous so that we, the unrighteous ones could receive his righteousness. Because of what Jesus did, God can declare those who believe in him to be *righteous* (Romans 3:21-26). This is the great exchange that is at the heart of the good news, the gospel: For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God" (1 Peter 3:18).

Just as the kingdom of heaven is "already but not yet" so is this righteousness we crave. God has *already* declared believers to be righteous. But in practice, we do not *yet* live righteously all the time. This is why, although we have the assurance that we are righteous, we *still* hunger and thirst for this righteousness to be completely real in our lives. That is what it means to "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness" (Matthew 6:33).

We also hunger and thirst for this world to be completely righteous. That is why we pray that God's kingdom would come, for God's kingdom is a kingdom of complete righteousness (Romans 14:17). While we do what we can while we can, we know that that worldwide righteousness will not come until Jesus returns. As Peter writes, "According to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells" (2 Peter 3:13).

Questions for Discussion and Application

1. From an early age, children have a keen sense of fairness and unfairness. Can you recall an early memory in which you became aware of something that was unfair?
2. If righteousness means "the way God intends the world to be," what are some *obvious* ways in which this world is not righteous? What are some *not-so-obvious* ways in which the world is not righteous?
3. What is true about *hungering* and *thirsting* that make these fitting metaphors for our need for righteousness?
4. What is the difference between longing for righteousness and actually hungering and thirsting for it?
5. People who have trusted in Christ as Savior have been declared righteous by God; that is, they have Christ's righteousness. So in what sense are they "filled with righteousness?" In what sense do they continue to hunger and thirst for it?