



Westminster
Presbyterian Church
NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

Kingdom Living: To Hunger and Thirst After Righteousness
Matthew 5:6

Some of us may remember that I referred to our Lord's Sermon on the Mount as the Quick Start Guide to Kingdom Living, and the Beatitudes as the Quick Start Guide to the Quick Start Guide, for if one's life is described by the qualities Jesus points to in the Beatitudes, their life is certainly being lived out the way Jesus had in mind when he called us to be servants in the Kingdom of God.

Those who have been here over the past few weeks understand that one of my goals in preaching a series on the Beatitudes is to challenge all of us to memorize them and to meditate upon them. You will find the first four Beatitudes on the front of the bulletin. Today's beatitude is the last one of the four listed on the bulletin cover. These are printed for us with the hope we will take our bulletins home and memorize these words and think about them during the week.

If you will promise to do this, I will attempt to cut the length of today's sermon from two hours and seven minutes to about fourteen minutes. Surely that sounds fair.

Today we come to the fourth Beatitude: **"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied."**

This beatitude causes, at least for me, a theological dilemma, for if we are already made righteous by the work of Jesus Christ, how then do we hunger and thirst for that which we already have? How can we hunger for the carrot upon which we are already chewing? When it comes to righteousness, our Confessions teach that it is something we already own. Righteousness is not something we earn, but something we receive from Christ.

It was none other than Martin Luther who sought righteousness with a greater degree than anyone in the 16th century. He sought until he finally threw in the towel and said, "I cannot be righteous no matter how much I seek

it.” Then he was finally liberated when he understood that Jesus was his righteousness.

Maybe the best way to think of this beatitude is to say, “Blessed are those who seek Jesus, for they will be satisfied.” Oh, yes, seeking righteousness is a dilemma for it is both something we have and something we pursue.

Our Reformed Faith proclaims, with both the Apostle Paul and the Prophet Habakkuk, “The just shall live by faith.” The righteous shall live by faith; it is a way of life, therefore is it something to hunger and thirst for even though we already have it.

It is a theological dilemma that James struggled with. Remember those words that give us Presbyterians pause, for we grip with all our strength the truth that we are saved by grace through faith. Nothing we do can add to our salvation and nothing we can do will subtract from it. God loves us; there is nothing we can do about that. Yet we read from James, “Faith without works is dead.” But what James said does not negate the grace of God spoken so eloquently by Paul. James was simply saying, “Show me a person who does nothing for Christ and I will show you a person who does not have faith.”

So Jesus said, **“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.”**

Years ago when segregation was a way of life, Fred Craddock went home to west Tennessee. He did what he always did when he arrived at home. He went to a local restaurant owned by an old high school chum whose name was Buck. Every year when Dr. Craddock visited, he would head to Buck’s. He would enter and say, “Good afternoon, Buck,” and Buck would slice the pie and pour the coffee. It was the same on every visit, until one year, Dr. Craddock entered Buck’s and said, “Good afternoon, Buck,”

And Buck said, “Let’s go for coffee.”

“What’s the matter? Isn’t this a restaurant?”

“I don’t know, sometimes I wonder.”

The two men went across the street to a coffee shop, ordered coffee, and sat there until Buck said, “Did you see the curtain?”

What he meant by the curtain is this: Back then there were a number of buildings in town that were called shotgun buildings. They were long slender buildings with a front door that opened to the street and a back door that opened to the alley. In the middle of Buck's building was a curtain. And back then if you were white you entered the restaurant from the front door. If you were black you entered from the alley and sat behind the curtain.

Buck said, "Did you see the curtain?"

"I saw the curtain, Buck."

"Well, that curtain has to come down."

Dr. Craddock said, "Good, bring it down."

"Well, that's easy for you to say. Come in here from out of state and tell me how to run my business."

"Okay, leave it up."

"I can't leave it up."

"Well, then take the thing down."

"I can't take it down."

Can you see that Buck had a problem? After another time of silence he said this, "If I take the curtain down, I lose a lot of my customers. If I leave that curtain up, I lose my soul."

Our greatest comfort is that in Christ we are righteous, yet we live in the paradox that we are to hunger and thirst after righteousness. We are to seek Jesus and to hunger and thirst for righteousness is to join with Buck in pulling down the curtain and it is most difficult. Sometimes it is unpopular, sometimes it makes others uncomfortable and puts our very lives in danger. But the pursuit of righteousness is the way we are called to live. In the end it is not what saves us, but it is the only way to know the blessing and satisfaction that comes in living for Jesus Christ.

There are many things in our lives that we want to hold onto that stifles any possibility to serve Christ in significant ways. We clutch tightly to what is mine, what is my due, what I deserve, we clutch so tightly that we cannot effectively serve Jesus and those Jesus calls us to serve. There are so many temptations that we hunger for and they entrap us, when our calling is to hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Max Lucado wrote about a time when he was watching a little girl's frustration in one of those pits that is filled with plastic balls. I don't see these as much as I used to, but children can jump into this pool of plastic almost like jumping into a swimming pool.

Lucado wrote, "I watched the little girl jump into the pit of brightly colored plastic balls, then she stood up and grabbed an armful of them and tried to walk to the slide located in the middle of the pit. I think that was the goal, to jump in, make your way to the slide, climb the slide then slide back into the pool of balls. But this girl was looking incredibly frustrated as she hugged that armful of balls, for holding the balls kept her from navigating herself to the slide. A young man, who I assumed to be her father, was shouting to her, 'Susan, let go of the balls, and you will be able to walk to the slide.'

"And the little girl screamed, 'No! I don't want to let go!'

"Susan, there are plenty of balls by the slide! The whole pit is full of balls, so let go of the ones you have and then you can walk to the slide.'

"And the little girl, with arms loaded struggled to take a step. Her father losing his patience said, 'Susan, let go of the balls, and get some more when you get to the slide.'

"By this time the balls, acting like quicksand, engulfed little Susan, and hidden underneath that mass of balls came Susan's muffled voice, 'Noooo!'

"Then everyone could hear her father say under his breath, 'Great, she's got what she wants, and she is going to hold on to it even if it kills her.'

Do you know anybody like that? Somebody whose life is filled with potential for good, but they don't do anything for anyone, because they will not let go of what is holding them back. They cannot help feed a hungry beggar, because they spent too much on the best cuts of meat.

I just love the good ol' American pride that says that I have the right. I have the right to burn and pollute and scar up this planet if that makes life more convenient for me.

It's my restaurant; I can leave the curtain up if that is what it takes to keep my customers.

Earlier this morning, Adam read to us from the prophet Amos. Can you imagine living in a time where religious people thought that righteousness was summed up by keeping the religious rituals? You know, rituals like waking up in the morning and reading from a devotional book, and spending time in prayer. Going to the temple or the church. Like the ritual of spending time in confession and breathing a sigh of relief convinced that the assurance of pardon spoke of a reality of forgiveness. Righteousness comes from suffering through a sermon, and taking the sacraments. Keep the rituals of your faith--that is what is required.

James would say, what good are the rituals, what good is faith if it does not cause you to be involved in the work of Jesus Christ in the world?

It is not long until someone who has this understanding of righteousness stumbles across Amos and other Old Testament Prophets. During Amos' time "Israelite society was marked by egregious injustice and a shocking contrast between extremes of wealth and poverty. The small farmer, whose economic status was marginal at best, often found himself at the mercy of the money lenders and the slightest calamity—a drought, a crop failure – made the farmer liable to foreclosure and eviction, if not bond service. The system which was itself harsh, was made harsher by the greed of the wealthy, who took unmerciful advantage of the plight of the poor in order to enlarge their holdings, often resorting to the sharpest practices, the falsification of weights and measures, and various legal dodges to achieve their ends." It was a day when judges could be bought and the poor had no redress. In increasing numbers they were robbed and dispossessed. It was a day not too unlike our own.

So we hear Amos cry out, "There are those who turn justice into bitterness and cast righteousness to the ground." Then maybe the best know words from Amos, "But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!"

Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness for they shall be satisfied." Whether your hungering and thirsting after righteousness leads you to combat racism, sexism, confusion, poverty, ignorance, spiritual darkness, disease; whether it leads you into the prayer closet, or out into the world as a missionary; whether it forces you to rethink your vocation, or recommit what you do for a living to Jesus' service; or

whether it leads you to a stronger proclamation of the gospel, it is in the pursuit, in hungering and thirsting after righteousness that you will find satisfaction.

Yes, many of the things we possess are good--our homes, cars, toys, tools, whatever, but not all good gifts are gained in the pursuit of righteousness, thus many of our "toys," though they may bring a temporary good feeling, are like holding onto the colorful plastic balls that bind us, and keep us from knowing the satisfaction of serving Jesus Christ as our goal. The bright colored plastic balls cannot satisfy, for they do not touch our souls. And it could be that we are called to live on less ourselves in order to seek righteousness? For that is where God touches our soul and only God can fill us and satisfy us.