

“Blessed Are Those Who Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness”

Part Five in a Series on the Sermon on the Mount

Matthew 5:6

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ronald L. Farmer

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Along with breathable air and shelter, water and food are the essential components of human life. It should come as no surprise, then, that when searching for a vivid metaphor to communicate the deepest aspects of spiritual desire, religious leaders have often used the experience of “hunger” and “thirst.”

The original hearers of the fourth Beatitude could relate to the metaphor of hunger and thirst in a way most of us today can't. Famines occurred frequently in ancient Israel, and when famine befell the land, it was widespread, for as we learned last week, at least 85% of the population belonged to the peasant class who barely eked out a living even in good years. And in the arid Holy Land, water was—and still is today—a commodity as precious as gold. For most North Americans, however, true hunger is found only among those most crushed by the economic system, and thirst is normally the result of accident.

I experienced one of those accidents many years ago as a teenager, giving me an unexpected “taste”—pun intended—of what it means to be truly thirsty. I mentioned last week that I grew up in a horse-crazy family. We were charter members of the Texas County Sheriff's Posse, a club that rode horses in area parades and went on trail rides. The highlight of each summer was the club's annual trip to the Black Mesa badlands, the highest point in the state of Oklahoma. This 28-mile chain of mesas stretches from southeastern Colorado, across northeastern New Mexico, and into the Oklahoma panhandle, following the north bank of the Cimarron River. In July or August of every year, we trailered our horses into the heart of this rugged country, famed for its many majestic mesas, such as Robbers' Roost so named for its use as a hideout by many of the Old West's most notorious outlaws—men like train robber Black Jack Ketchum who sometimes rode with Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, and the infamous cattle rustler Captain William Coe, who built a stone fort on Robbers' Roost to protect his gang from the long arm of the law.

One morning, a group of about 30 of us decided to take a trail ride before lunch. Monty Joe Roberts, the local rancher who let us camp on his spread, was not with us that morning, but one of the men boasted that he knew the land like the back of his hand. So we set out, promising the chuck wagon cook we'd be back in time for lunch.

As you have probably already guessed, we didn't get back in time for lunch—and we were late for dinner, too. We got lost in the rugged, arid terrain with only two small canteens of water among the 30 of us. Did I mention that it was hot? Upper-nineties that week. The canteens were dry by mid-morning, and we were all dry by noon—including the horses. On and on we road—the sun beating down mercilessly and a hot, dry wind blowing out of the

southwest. We were thirsty; the horses were thirsty. And on we road. Toward evening, the lead horse suddenly lifted his head, flared his nostrils, and took off at a dead run, with the rest of our horses in wild pursuit. The horses smelled water and there was no stopping them. We flew over a rise and there below us was a most beautiful sight: a windmill pumping water into a stock tank.

Now, I liked my horse, but I had never drunk after him. But that day, I plunged my head into the stock tank right alongside my horse. For that day, I learned the power of a burning thirst.

In the fourth Beatitude, Jesus deliberately tapped into the most primitive of human desires—hunger and thirst—to express the deep spiritual yearning for righteousness that marks Christian discipleship. But what exactly does the word “righteousness” mean? The noted Scottish New Testament scholar of a previous generation, A. M. Hunter, called righteousness a “chameleon among New Testament words,”¹ and for good reason. More than most words, its meaning changes based on its linguistic context. Unfortunately, when it comes to the fourth Beatitude—a single sentence—there is not much context to help us determine its meaning. The Greek word used in Matthew, *dikaiōsunē*, is typically translated by either of two English words: “righteousness” or “justice.” These are two quite different notions in English, so we cannot be dogmatic in how we translate and interpret this Beatitude. Humility is required. Nevertheless, let me offer three proposals, each of which has been championed by various biblical scholars throughout Christian history.

Let’s begin with the translation “righteousness.” At its root, this term denotes the state of a person who is as he or she ought to be. A righteous person acts in accordance with divine, moral law and is thus free from guilt or sin. Such a person is “upright.”

Obviously, this translation of the word makes excellent sense of the fourth Beatitude: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst to act in accordance with divine law, to be moral, to be upright, to be free from guilt or sin.” Disciples of Christ do, indeed, desire to be upright in thought, word, and action. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

The second way Christians throughout history have translated this Beatitude is, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice.” Justice is the quality of being fair and impartial, of ensuring that all people receive their fair share. No doubt, many if not all of us have experienced a major injustice in life. If so, you remember the burning desire for justice you felt, especially if it seemed you had no hope of being treated fairly. And when you look around at all the injustice in the world today, I’m sure that at times your heart breaks due to your intense longing to see these countless injustices rectified. Jesus said that this “burning for justice” is a character trait of his disciples. Disciples hunger and thirst that all people be treated fairly and receive their fair share. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice.

It appears, then, that both English translations of the Greek word *dikaiōsunē* result in excellent meanings for this Beatitude. But rather than feeling forced to choose between the

two translations, let me suggest that we look at the third way this Beatitude has been understood by scholars in the course of Christian history.

Throughout the Psalms and also in Second Isaiah,² the Hebrew equivalent of *dikaiōsunē* was often used as a synonym for “God’s salvation.” Consider the following exclamation of praise, expressed in the poetic form known as Hebrew parallelism, where the second line restates in different wording the idea found in the first line:

“The LORD has made known his salvation;
he has revealed his righteousness before all the nations.” (Psalm 98:2)

Or consider the following lament:

“My eyes fail looking for your salvation,
and for your righteous word.” (Psalm 119:123)

So perhaps we should understand Jesus’ fourth Beatitude as saying, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for God’s salvation, for the vindication of the right, for the triumph of God’s just cause.” God’s salvation includes both notions expressed by the English words righteousness and justice, for the biblical term salvation denotes not only deliverance or rescue, but also the process of being made whole, of achieving well-being.

No matter which of these three possible translations we settle on—righteousness, justice, or salvation—the Beatitude’s promise is crystal clear: those who so hunger and thirst will be filled or satisfied. The term used here means to satiate, to quench completely.

“But when?” we might ask. “When will our hunger and thirst for righteousness-justice-salvation be satisfied?” Christian leaders down through the centuries have taught that the first fruits of the Christian harvest can already be experienced in the here-and-now, even though the complete fulfillment lies in the future. Shortly after the conclusion of World War II, Lutheran New Testament scholar Oscar Cullmann came up with a wonderful metaphor to express this Christian conviction. He said that in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus we see the “D-Day” of God’s great work of salvation. “V-Day,” the culmination of God’s salvation, is still to come, but “D-Day” has made “V-Day” inevitable.

Thus, we live “between the times,” between “D-Day” and “V-Day.” We experience the first-fruits of God’s great redemptive activity in the here-and-now, for as Disciples of Christ, we are now part of the solution, rather than part of the problem. This glorious taste of righteousness-justice-salvation is satisfying, to be sure, but our hunger and thirst is not yet slaked entirely. We hunger and thirst for more. And I believe that is exactly as it should be.

The well-known contemplative Christian leader and Franciscan priest Richard Rohr suggested that we think of the fourth Beatitude in the following terms: “Make sure you’re not satisfied. . . . Keep yourself in a state of dissatisfaction.”³ His point was that as long as we are

not completely satisfied, as long as we still hunger and thirst, we will continue to be part of the solution. We will continue to be partners with God in spreading righteousness-justice-salvation throughout our hurting world, until one day all in the cosmos will be satisfied.

And that's today's good news. Amen.

¹ A. M. Hunter, *Design for Life: The Sermon on the Mount* (SCM Press, 1953) 37.

² This is the scholarly designation for Isaiah 40-55. For a nice summary, see:

https://christlutheranelcerrito.org/interest/BookofIsaiah_Part2.pdf

³ Richard Rohr with John Feister, *Jesus' Plan for a New World: The Sermon on the Mount* (Franciscan Media, 1996) 134.