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The Beatitudes: Matthew 5:1-12 - The Character of the Kingdom
Part Five: Blessed are Those Who Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness -

By Tal Davis

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

Have you ever been really hungry for something to eat or extremely thirsty for a drink of water or other liquid? Most of us can think of a time when we felt famished and really wanted to have a good meal. Sadly, many people around the world still suffer from hunger due to famine or political oppression. A number of organizations, many of them Christian, work diligently to provide relief for those enduring food shortages. Many people actually self-inflict high degrees of hunger pain in order to lose weight or keep it down. That may be necessary in some instances. But if it becomes an obsession, he or she may suffer anorexia, bulimia, or another kind of eating disorder.

We also may recall when we were dehydrated. Athletes experience thirst during a heavy workout, especially if it is in hot weather. In the old days, coaches were reluctant to give players a drink during practice because they thought it would slow players down or make them nauseated. Now they know that athletes need to stay adequately hydrated to prevent muscle cramps and to perform at a high level.

The truth is, most of us in the United States have never really had to face long or intense periods of hunger or thirst in the literal sense. That's a good thing, and we should all be thankful that we live in a land where food and water are so easily obtained. But it does have one disadvantage in a spiritual sense. Since we don't normally feel hun-

gry or thirsty, it may be a bit difficult to fully comprehend what Jesus meant by "hunger and thirst for righteousness" in this context.

In this series we are examining the Beatitudes. We have thus far looked at the first three. In this installment we consider the fourth Beatitude, "Blessed are those who hunger (*peinao*) and thirst (*dipsao*) for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied (*chortazo* - to fill, as with a full stomach)" (Matthew 5:6). We will begin as we have with the others by discussing just what the Beatitude does not mean.

First, hungering and thirsting for righteousness does not mean hungering and thirsting for perfection. That simply is not possible this side of heaven. Only Jesus lived a perfect and sinless life. If we are constantly striving to be perfect, we will inevitably fail and live a life of utter frustration and despair. What usually happens to individuals, and those in movements who seek perfection, is that they fall into the trap of legalism. That is, they start defining perfection by what external sinful behaviors they do not do (as they define and delineate them). Thus they don't wear certain styles of clothing, don't wear jewelry, avoid certain styles of music or entertainment, etc. Often this breeds spiritual pride among those who meticulously abide by the prescriptive rules, as it did with the Pharisees in Jesus' time.

Second, and closely related to the previous point, is that hungering and thirsting for righteousness does not mean seeking spiritual success in doing good works. The New Testament clearly warns against relying on good works to attain salvation or righteous-

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ness. That only comes by grace through faith in Christ. Works are the natural outcome of salvation, not its cause. As Paul asserts:

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for (unto) good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them. (Ephesians 2:8-10 NASB)

Finally, hungering and thirsting for righteousness does not mean depriving one's self of food, water, or material needs. Many people believe that fasting has great spiritual and physical benefits. However, there is nothing intrinsically righteous about withholding food and water from ourselves. As we indicated, extreme hunger and thirst may be bad for our health. That being said, fasting may be a beneficial spiritual exercise if done cautiously and in a healthy way.

So, now that we have clarified a few of the mistaken ways some people understand this Beatitude, let's examine several positive dimensions of this important moral and spiritual principle of Jesus.

First, hungering and thirsting for righteousness is deeply desiring and praying to be right with God and be like Him. As we said, we cannot attain perfection in this life. Nonetheless, our greatest desire should be to live in ways that are glorifying to Him and in line with His revealed will. The key to this principle is daily to confess our sins, accept God's forgiveness, and walk in the power of the Holy Spirit. Prayer and Bible study are vital aspects of this concept. They are how we maintain a right relationship with God so as to know His will for our lives.

Second, hungering and thirsting for righteousness is a desire to be free from sin and from the desire to sin. Again, as we indicated before, we may not attain perfection. Still, we should desire in our deepest soul to have victory over sin and to be free of its influence in our lives. This is, of course, a lifetime quest and will only end in glory. This is what theologians call the process of sanctification; that is, the lifelong growth toward Christ-likeness.

Third, hungering and thirsting for righteousness is a sincere desire to put Christ first in life. Today, we have so many things competing with our dedication to God. We should take stock often to make sure nothing is hindering or taking precedence over our relationship with Christ. If we see that anything is diverting our attention or time from serving Him, we should do what we can to remedy the situation.

Jesus gave a good illustration of the difference between a counterfeit desire for righteousness and that which is authentic. In Luke 18:9-14 is recorded this parable by Jesus:

And He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!' I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."

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That last sentence sums up just what seeking righteousness is really all about. The key is humility.

So we have analyzed what Jesus meant by hungering and thirsting for righteousness. But we should remember, like all the Beatitudes, Jesus makes a promise to those who take this one seriously. He says simply "they shall be satisfied." If we sincerely desire to live righteously in accord with His will, He will see His purposes fulfilled in our lives. This should make any Christian feel a sense of satisfaction. Its sort of like enjoying a good meal

when really hungry or drinking a cool bottle of water after a hard workout. Nothing satisfies more than that.

Here are some other passages in Scripture that reiterate this principle. *As the deer pants for the water brooks,*

So my soul pants for You, O God.

My soul thirsts for God, for the living God;

When shall I come and appear before God? (Psalm 42:1, 2)

O God, You are my God; I shall seek You earnestly;

My soul thirsts for You, my flesh yearns for You,

In a dry and weary land where there is no water. (Psalm 63:1)

For He has satisfied the thirsty soul, And the hungry soul He has filled with what is good. (Psalm 107:9)

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Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst. (John 6:35)