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# THE EFFICACY OF HUNGERING AND THIRSTING FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS

Matthew 5:6

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*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,  
For they shall be filled. **Matthew 5:6 (NKJV)***

Restlessness and longing are universal traits of the human heart. We keep craving and longing for what will satisfy the heart. Humans possess strong desires for several things such as pleasure, love, food and the likes, all in the bid to satisfy these longings. Among these human needs is the desire for food.

The Bible has a number of examples of how strong the motivation of hunger can be. Esau became so hungry that he “sold his own birthright for a single meal” (**Hebrews 12:16; see Genesis 25:27–34**). The Israelites in the wilderness angered the Lord by crying for “*the fish . . . , the cucumbers and the melons and the leeks and the onions and the garlic*” they had eaten in Egypt (**Numbers 11:5; see v. 10**). Agur prayed that the Lord would not give him poverty lest he be in want and steal, and cast a reflection on the name of his God (**Proverbs 30:8, 9**). One temptation of poverty would be for one who was hungry to steal food. Jesus understood both hunger and thirst. In the wilderness, “*after He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He then became hungry*” (**Matthew 4:2**).

Later, on the cross, He said, “*I am thirsty*” (**John 19:28**).

For over four Sundays we have been on the series; the Beatitudes, of which we have discussed the blessedness of been *poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted*. Last week, one of our bishops discussed verse 5, *blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth*. Today, we are diving straight to verse 6.

**“BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO HUNGER AND THIRST FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS...”  
What is Righteousness?**

Before we discuss the words “*hunger and thirst*,” we need to establish what “*righteousness*” is, for that is what we are to crave. “*Righteousness*” is from the Greek word *dikaiousune*. In both the Greek and the English, the heart of this word is “*right*.” *Dikaiousune* has a variety of meanings. When applied to God, the word means “*right-being*.” This is absolute rightness. God is the only One who is right in every respect. When applied to people, *dikaiousune* can have two meanings. The first is “*right-living*” (see **1 John 2:29; 3:7, 10**). None of us can live perfectly, so this is a relative rightness. When applied to people, the

second meaning of *dikaiosune* is “right-standing”—right-standing with the Lord.

This is an imputed righteousness. We are not actually righteous (see **Romans 3:10**), but God counts us as righteous (see **Romans 4:3, 5**; KJV) when we believe in Jesus and do His will. We can have right-standing with God—not on the basis of personal merit, but by His grace and mercy. Many writers disagree on which definition of *dikaiosune* Jesus had in mind in our text. If I had to choose between the three, I would select “right standing.” We should have a deep craving for right-standing with our Maker. I do not know, however, that we need to make a choice. The Christian who strives for right-being and right living will be in good standing with God. We need heart-hunger and thirst for God Himself—the desire to have a vital relationship with the One who loves us and cares for us.

David wrote, “*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*” (**Psalm 42:1, 2**; see **63:1**; **143:6**). Our heart-hunger for God will include hungering for Jesus, “*the bread of life*” (see **John 6:48–51**). If we long for God and Jesus, will we not also crave right-standing with them? If we have these hungers, will we not yearn to do right, to live as God and Jesus desire that we should?

One more idea needs to be considered regarding the desire for righteousness. Each of the three definitions discussed is closely linked with the Word of God. Our righteous God has revealed Himself fully in His Word. We discover how we can have right-standing with God through a study of His Word. We learn the right way to live from the Word. Therefore, we should not be surprised that the psalmist said to God, “*Let my tongue sing of Your word, for all Your commandments*

*are righteousness*” (**Psalm 119:172**). Regardless of which definition of “righteousness” we use in our study of **Matthew 5:6**, if we “*hunger and thirst for righteousness*,” this will include hungering and thirsting for a deeper knowledge and understanding of the Scriptures.

Many passages teach that God’s Word provides food for the soul. Jesus said, “*Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God*” (**Matthew 4:4**). When Paul referred to what he had taught the Corinthians, he said, “*I gave you milk to drink*” (**1 Corinthians 3:2a**). Peter told his readers, “*Like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation*” (**1 Peter 2:2**). The author of Hebrews said that God’s Word contains both “milk” for immature Christians and “solid food” for the mature:

*For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil* (**Hebrews 5:12–14**).

For the soul to be nourished, however, it is not enough merely to read and study the Word; we must also do what it says. Jesus said, “*My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me*” (**John 4:34**). The Significance of “Hunger” and “Thirst” Now that we have an idea about the scope of the righteousness we are to crave, let us turn our attention to the words “hunger” and “thirst.” “*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for*

*righteousness, for they shall be satisfied*". When Jesus spoke of hungering and thirsting, His words meant more to first-century listeners than they do to some of us. Many of us must admit that we have not experienced extreme hunger and thirst.

I remember when we were at Auch Polytechnic, we ran out of food stuffs, money, and it was getting close to our semester's exams, there was no food to eat as we were still expecting money from our parents. When we eventually got food to eat from a friend, the three of us living together had to lock our door to ensure no one comes in to partake with us because we felt we do not know when the next meal will come from.

However, nothing we experienced compares with the way many people lived in Bible times. Labourers barely made enough to feed their families. When they were hurt or sick and could not work, they received no pay at all. They had to listen to their hungry children crying in the night. Further, nothing I experienced in my school years compares with the way many live today.

"Hunger" is from *peinao*, which means "to hunger, be hungry . . . to suffer want . . . to be needy." Used figuratively, it means "to crave ardently, to seek with eager desire." "Thirst" is from *dipsao*, which means "to suffer thirst; suffer from thirst." When used in a figurative sense, it refers to those "who painfully feel their want of, and eagerly long for, those things by which the soul is refreshed, supported, strengthened." I have noted that some of us do not appreciate what it means to be extremely hungry. Many of us do not understand what it means to be really, really thirsty. We twist a knob, and water comes out. This was not true in Bible lands. Their water came from wells and streams, but wells and streams can dry

up. Further, when people travelled across the arid lands of the Middle East (see **Psalm 63:1**), they often had to go long distances without water. They understood thirst far better.

The intensity of desire indicated by the Greek words in our text is illustrated by two tragic events in history. One was the siege of Jerusalem by Titus in A.D. 70. Josephus reported that the siege brought a famine which was "*too hard for all other passions. . . . Children pulled the very morsels that their fathers were eating out of their very mouths, and, what was still more to be pitied, so did the mothers do as to their infants.*" An earlier famine is described in **2 Kings 6**. During that terrible famine, a donkey's head sold for eighty pieces of silver. Other such items, which under different circumstances would be unthinkable as food, were sold for human consumption (v. 25). The most tragic result of the famine, however, is found in verse 29, where a mother said, "*So we boiled my son and ate him.*"

As strong as a mother's love is, in that mother, the hunger drive was stronger. As tragic and abhorrent as these illustrations are, perhaps they convey the significance the terms "hunger" and "thirst" had for Jesus' first century audience. When Jesus spoke of hungering and thirsting, He was referring to the powerful motivation of a starving person who would give anything for a scrap of food, or someone who was dying of thirst and would give anything for one swallow of water. The question each of us should ask is "*Do I have that intensity of hunger and thirst for God, His way, and His will?*" Following are some tests that might help you determine whether or not you really hunger and thirst for righteousness.

***Are you more concerned about physical things or spiritual things?*** Is being close to God more important to you than acquiring possessions? Is being right with God of greater concern than being popular with people? Are you more desirous of living a godly life than you are of being successful? What are your priorities? Some find it difficult to sit still for a sermon, while they have little trouble sitting for hours of entertainment.

***Do you take advantage of every opportunity to be “fed” spiritually, to learn about God and His way?*** An old farmer told a preacher, “*You seem to spend a lot of time urging people to come to Bible classes and worship. I never have to urge my cows to come to the feeding trough.*” A starving person does not have to be begged to go where food is available.

***Are you on time for spiritual “meals,” or do you show up late?*** A really hungry person is waiting at the table when mealtime is near. Is your spiritual appetite growing and maturing? Are you starting to enjoy “solid food,” or are you still on a “milk” diet (see **Hebrews 5:12–14; 1 Corinthians 3:2**)?

What if an honest examination convinces us that we do not hunger and thirst after righteousness as we should? What can be done to help us have hungry hearts? One useful plan is to work our way through the first three beatitudes.

If we recognize our deep spiritual need (the first beatitude), we will be filled with profound sorrow (the second beatitude), and we will be ready and anxious to yield ourselves to God and His will (the third beatitude). Surely, this will make us cry out, “*God, I want You in my life. Please bless my life. Tell me what to do, and I’ll do it!*” This is hungering and

thirsting after righteousness (the fourth beatitude).

To make this lesson as practical as possible, however, let me add a few suggestions on what might be done to improve spiritual appetites, especially an appetite to learn God’s Word. First, let me say a few words to those who teach and preach God’s Word. We need to make our “*meals*” as appetizing as possible. It is not enough to teach God’s Word; we need to present our lessons in an appealing way—so they will capture the attention and hold the interest of our audience. Many of us can recall teachers, religious or secular, whose lessons were dry and “*tasteless*,” while we remember others who made it a pleasure to learn. Those of us who teach and preach will not always reach this goal, but let us try to make our “*meals*” as appetizing as possible.

Having said that, let me emphasize that, where hunger for God’s Word is lacking, the primary fault is not with the speaker, but with the hearer. Through the years, I have occasionally heard criticism of sermons and lessons—sermons and lessons which plainly taught God’s Word. The criticism made me wonder whether or not the listeners were spiritually hungry and thirsty. I have listened to a wide range of teachers and preachers—a few great, many good, some not so-good, and a handful bad—but in reality there is always something to learn.

Again, an important goal for Christians is to develop—with the help of God—the attributes described in the first three beatitudes. To do this, we can use techniques similar to those used to improve physical appetites.

***(1) Recognize the need for spiritual nourishment.*** In the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus said, “*Blessed are you who*



*hunger now, for you shall be satisfied" (Luke 6:21a).* Then He added, *"Woe to you who are well-fed now, for you shall be hungry" (v. 25a).* In other words, *"Woe to you who feel no spiritual hunger, for you shall stand before God spiritually starved!"* Take care that you do not become like the Laodiceans who said they had *"need of nothing" (Revelation 3:17).*

**(2) Develop an appreciation for spiritual nourishment.** Is there some physical food you enjoy now that you did not enjoy the first time you ate it? Perhaps you had parents who insisted you eat it, so you gradually learned to like it. Perhaps, as an adult, you discovered you needed certain foods for good health and have persisted in eating them until you now enjoy them. Even as we can develop an appreciation for physical food, so we can develop an appreciation for spiritual food.

**(3) Improve your spiritual appetite by spiritual exercise.** Nothing makes food taste better than a hard day of physical labor. Even so, spiritual exercise will make us long for and enjoy spiritual food. According to the KJV, Paul told Timothy, *"Exercise thyself . . . unto godliness" (1 Timothy 4:7b; see v. 8).* In the NASB we read, *"Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly" (Romans 12:6a).* As an illustration of how spiritual exercise can help stimulate a spiritual appetite, think about teaching the Bible—whether in a class or to a friend. If you are conscientious about teaching, you will want to do a God-pleasing and God-glorifying job. You will be motivated, therefore, to study diligently for each lesson and then study some more to be able to answer questions that might be asked.

**(4) Improve your spiritual appetite by "eating" regularly.** A person who does not have regular mealtimes may lose his appetite or fill himself with "junk food" which destroys his appetite for healthy food. Spiritually, we need to have regular *"mealtimes."* The Bereans were complimented by Luke because *"they received the word with great eagerness" and examined the Scriptures "daily" (Acts 17:11).* We need to be present for congregational *"mealtimes,"* and we also need daily times for personal study and prayer. Regular study will enable us to handle the Word accurately **(2 Timothy 2:15).**

**(5) Beware of appetite killers.** Even as physical junk food can destroy one's appetite for healthy food, mental junk food can diminish our interest in God's Word. We can so fill our minds with worldly matters and worldly entertainment that spiritual food loses its appeal for us. Some people long for things of this world which cannot satisfy the soul (see *Isaiah 55:2*).

**(6)** Here is one more suggestion: It may help to share your *"meals."* If you are having trouble stimulating your spiritual appetite, sharing your spiritual meals may help. Husbands and wives can study together. A family can have family devotionals. Sit down with a friend and talk about the Bible. Perhaps a group of friends could get together for times of study and prayer.

**"... FOR THEY SHALL BE SATISFIED OR FILLED."** *"Blessed [happy] are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. . . ."* What does hungering and thirsting for righteousness have to do with happiness? As noted in our studies of the other beatitudes, the attitude itself can contribute to our happiness. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness have their priorities right, so they are less

likely to be disturbed by the little irritations that contribute to the world's unhappiness.

Again, however, the emphasis is on the God-given promise at the end of the beatitude. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will have happiness-plus, *"for they shall be satisfied."* *"Shall be satisfied"* is from *chortazo*. The KJV has *"shall be filled."* When used in connection with animals, *chortazo* means *"to feed with herbs, grass, hay, to fill or satisfy with food, to fatten."* *"In regard to men, it describes the filling of a person to the point of full and complete satisfaction."* This is the word used to describe the five thousand Jesus fed: *"And they all ate and were satisfied"* (**Matthew 14:20**).

### Conclusion

*"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied."* Do you *"hunger and thirst for righteousness"*? Someone has said, *"If you are not hungry, you are either asleep, fed, or dead."* Most mothers become concerned when their children lose their appetites; a loss of appetite can be a sign of ill health.

This is a valid concern in regard to the physical, but it is even more important in regard to the spiritual. A loss of appetite for righteousness inevitably culminates in spiritual death. If you do hunger and thirst for righteousness, you have the opportunity to show how intense your desire is. You can confess your faith in Jesus (**Romans 10:9, 10**) and be baptized into Him (**Galatians 3:26, 27**). What does being baptized have to do with desiring righteousness? When Jesus asked John to baptize Him, He said, *"... in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness"* (**Matthew 3:15**).

Even as God satisfied the physically thirsty and hungry in the wilderness, so He satisfies the spiritually thirsty and hungry today. Some insist that the promise of **Matthew 5:6** can only apply to the life to come because this life is filled with dissatisfaction and discontent. Once more, I believe the promise of **Matthew 5:6** is for both now and eternity. Jesus said, *"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**). The assurance Jesus gave includes the blessings of *"the last day"* (vv. 39, 40, 54) but does not exclude the blessings of today (see vv. 56, 57).