

Thirsting for Righteousness

This morning we continue our series *Thirsting for God*, by considering our Lord's promise to those who thirst for righteousness. **Matt. 5:1-11 (pray)**

Matt 5-7 contains the sermon on the mount, Jesus' longest recorded sermon. Jesus took his disciples to a mountainside and taught them about the kingdom of God and what kingdom living looks like. The kingdom of God turns the standards and values of the world upside down. In the beatitudes Jesus promises blessing – or deep happiness – to the very people the world would consider “unblessed”. Things that we would consider serious handicaps on our happiness such as weakness and poverty and grief and lack of status become channels of blessing and deep joy in the kingdom of God.

- *Blessed are the poor in spirit...*
- *Blessed are those who mourn...*
- *Blessed are the meek...*
- *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...*
- *Blessed are the merciful...*
- *Blessed are the pure in heart...*
- *Blessed are the peacemakers...*
- *Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake...*
- *Blessed are you when others revile and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you...*

The kingdom of God redefines what's important in life and how it should be lived. And in verse 6 Jesus focuses our attention on the blessedness that comes from longing for righteousness: *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.*

It's a good thing, Jesus says, to hunger and thirst for righteousness, because the one who does will be satisfied. In Matt 6:33 Jesus instructs us to *seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness*, telling us that all the other things we need in life will be added to us as we do. If we put the kingdom and the righteousness of God first in our lives, we'll find the things that the world chases after will chase after us!

This tells us that righteousness is central to our lives as disciples of Jesus, but what is this righteousness that we're to hunger and thirst for, and how do we hunger and thirst for it? At the risk of making it sound like everything comes in threes, I do believe that there are three different aspects of righteousness that we should be thirsting for. Not three different righteousness' –it's the same righteousness – but three different expressions or manifestations of righteousness worked out in the believer's life. Imputed righteousness, imparted righteousness, and what I'm going to call expanded righteousness. Sounds complicated, but it's really not. Think of it as the ripple effect: when you drop a rock into water, there are ever expanding ripples that travel outward. When the righteousness of the kingdom of God is dropped (for lack of a better word) into our lives and this world, it ripples outward in ever expanding circles as well.

- I. **We should hunger and thirst for imputed righteousness – righteousness that comes from God by faith**

The word righteousness, which can also be interchanged with the word just or justified, describes a life lived in conformity to a known standard of law and contains such qualities as honesty, virtue, legality, and justice. In the Bible, righteousness is always connected to God and His will because it is God's perfect and absolute standard that establishes what is righteous and just. God loves righteousness and justice and hates unrighteousness and injustice because every fiber of God's infinite Being *is* perfectly righteous and just. Built into the concept of righteousness is the meaning of right standing with God. The righteous are in right standing with God, the unrighteous are not.

God loves righteousness and a lot of it! Amos 5:24 says, *"But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."* Thirsting for righteousness would mean we are calling for the same thing – let justice roll down like waters – but God's justice and righteousness wouldn't roll over us like a gentle ripple, it would roll over us like a tsunami, crushing us under its weight and sweeping us away in judgment because we are NOT righteous.

Romans 3:10-12 gives this bleak diagnosis of the human race: *10 "None is righteous, no, not one;¹¹ no one understands; no one seeks for God. ¹²All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one."* Because we are sinners and fall far short of God's perfect standards, His righteousness would be the last thing we'd want if not for the gospel of Christ because His righteousness and our unrighteousness could only mean God's righteous wrath would be poured out upon us in everlasting judgment.

But this is where the gospel is so sweet to our souls. Romans 1:17 says, *for in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed--a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."* In other words, the righteousness revealed in the gospel isn't based on our works; it is based on Christ and received by faith.

Paul makes this very clear in Phil 3:8: *⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith...*

This is the sweetness and the power of the gospel. God has given us the righteousness of Christ through faith. Jesus didn't come to make unrighteousness ok with God; he came to make us righteous by giving us his righteousness. This is imputed righteousness – it's a legal transaction. We aren't actually living our lives with the perfect righteousness of Christ (we're still sinners), but his perfect righteousness has been credited to our account so that when God looks at us, He sees His Son's righteousness. We stand before God perfectly justified because of what His Son Jesus did. Romans 5:1 says this: *Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

That may seem very familiar to some of us, but let's not rush by this and miss its power for us this morning. If you are a disciple of Jesus, if you have placed your faith in his saving work, then you are perfectly righteous in God's sight right now. If you are feeling condemned and far from God because you're looking at your performance, let this truth be sweet to your soul: you stand not in your own righteousness but in the righteousness of Christ. If there's a sin that's bearing down on you, creating a sense of distance between you and God then 1 John 1:9 gives the antidote: *⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

As disciples of Jesus, we hunger and thirst for the righteousness that comes from God by faith. And if you're not a Christian, the first step to salvation isn't to try and get your act together and be a better person. It's to realize that you can never be good enough to satisfy God's perfect requirements, so instead clinging by faith to Jesus. You don't want to stand before God in your own righteousness. I would urge you to pause right now and ask Jesus to be your Savior and cleanse and forgive you and to give you the gift of righteousness that comes by faith.

II. We should thirst for imparted righteousness – righteousness that we experience as a change in the way we conduct our lives

The gospel starts with imputed righteousness but it doesn't stop there. I think this can be an area of confusion for a lot of believers. Since we're saved by grace alone, and we are made righteous by faith in Christ alone, and any effort to add our own good works or righteousness to our salvation is legalism and empties the cross of saving power, we can be concerned that any strong call to live righteously will necessarily be legalistic.

The second "ripple" of righteousness in the disciple's life is that after being justified by Christ's righteousness, God's power goes to work on our hearts and minds and conduct, leading us into a growing experience of righteousness. But that isn't something that just happens to us, it's something that we are to actively and passionately pursue and work at. Peter writes:

[5] For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, [6] and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, [7] and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. Then in verse 8 he promises these believers that making every effort to grow in these virtues (righteousness) will have great benefit to their knowledge of Christ and their fruitfulness in Christ: [8] For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. 2 Peter 1:5-8

Then in verse 9 Peter warns the believer who aren't making every effort to add to their faith these qualities that, far from holding strongly to the gospel, they are in danger of losing sight of the gospel:

[9] For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. (2 Peter 1:5-9 ESV)

We see the same truth in Paul's writings, such as his encouragement to Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:

[7] Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; [8] for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come...10] For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe. (1 Tim. 4:7-10)

Toiling and striving to be godly – in other words to live righteous, ethical, moral lives – isn't *instead* of having our hope set on the Savior, but *because* we have our hope set on Christ.

As Jesus sat on the side of a mountain and taught his disciples about the kingdom of God, when he promised them that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be blessed and one day satisfied, he was calling them to be passionate about living righteously. That's what hunger and thirst mean – it should be a driving force in our lives.

Legalism drags our hearts down into condemnation or pride because we're trying to justify ourselves before God. But Jesus' promise – *blessed are those* – lifts our hearts to believe that by the grace of God at work in us we can breathe the pure and clear air of righteousness. Not that we arrive at perfect righteousness, but we get a vision of its beauty and we go for it! If our struggle is with lying, we can be changed by the power of God so that we not only tell the truth, we love the truth! If we struggle with laziness, we can not only discipline ourselves to do the things we don't want to do, we can find a greater joy in doing what we're supposed to do than any pleasure we ever found in listening to our flesh's urge to procrastinate. Whatever unrighteousness we have going on, the power of Christ in us is able to change us from within by changing our hearts – but that doesn't happen apart from our effort.

Listen, a strong press to live righteously – and a strong rebuke when we're not – isn't necessarily evidence of legalism. If a disciple is struggling with some sin, the voice of the Bible doesn't always speak in soft and sympathetic tones. Sometimes it speaks with a clear and strong voice: stop it! Flee it! Repent of it! Change it! Paul tells Timothy *command and teach these things*. Rebuke, exhort, command, appeal. Listen, as a child of God, not only do I need God's discipline when I stray, I *want* it. I remember many years ago when I was going through a backslidden time in my walk with God, when one night it occurred to me that the Bible says that God disciplines the ones He loves, and I realized that I wasn't living like I should be, and I wasn't experiencing God's discipline either. I remember praying, *God, please discipline me. Spank me. I want Your love more than I want to be comfortable in the hardness of my heart.*

There should be a strong passion for living righteously to the glory of God. But there's a third "ripple" effect of this righteousness.

III. We should thirst for expanded righteousness - righteousness in the world around us

Ever read a news report about something that happened or is going on and something just rises up in you? Like a mix of anger and frustration and "something's got to be done about this" or "this is SO wrong!" Read about a child being abused, or a Christian woman being held in a Sudanese prison condemned to be whipped and hanged, or a US Marine being held in a Mexican prison because he made a wrong turn? And it's like, someone please DO something! Make this right!

When we read statistics of how many innocent babies have been aborted over the past 40 years, it should break our hearts and we should cry out, "how long, O Lord?" How long until you bring justice? When we see corruption and oppression and the guilty getting away with it, it should twist something in our hearts. It's not spiritual to say, "well, this isn't my home. So no big deal. I've got heaven and that's all that matters." No, it's not all that matters. Hungering and thirsting for righteousness includes a passionate desire to see righteousness sweep over our nation and our world. To see injustice righted, to see the oppressed set free, and to see oppressors taken down. Now, we need to be careful not to become angry, Bible thumping people cause that's just obnoxious. Jesus isn't calling us to be rebels or insurrectionists. Jesus didn't picket King Herod when he imprisoned John. But when John was executed, Jesus had to get alone for a while to work through the grief and righteous anger and no doubt his heart hungered and thirsted for the righteousness of his kingdom to invade this corrupt world. So should ours.

Hungering and thirsting for righteousness in the world is a characteristic of a disciple. We should thirst for Jesus' kingdom to invade this dark world. And we can do what we can to push back the darkness and be light and salt in the world. Eric and Maria are working at a beautiful ministry in Tanzania that is pushing back the injustice of the disabled being cast off and discarded as though they were unimportant and dispensible. Eric and Maria and the others working there are pushing back with the love and mercy of the

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gospel. We have those opportunities every day too. But ultimately it is a hunger and thirst that won't be completely satisfied until Jesus returns to set up his kingdom. One day he will establish his perfect kingdom and righteous rule on this earth and in that day, blessed will be those who hungered and thirsted for righteousness, for they will be (perfectly) satisfied.

As disciples of Jesus we should hunger and thirst for righteousness: imputed, imparted, and expanded. Through faith in Christ, God calls us to receive His righteousness, live righteously, and expand righteousness in the world until the day Christ's kingdom invades this world and establishes his righteousness perfectly and forever. Let's pray.