

Blessed Are Those Who Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



Prayer of Illumination

Gracious God, we do not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from your mouth.

Make us hungry for this heavenly food,
that it may nourish us today in the ways of eternal life;
through Jesus Christ, the bread of heaven.

Amen.

Scripture: The Fourth Beatitude, Matthew 5:6 (NRSVue)

6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – Blessed Are Those Who Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness

One of my favorite stories in Greek mythology is of King Tantalus. His father was Zeus and his mother Pluto. Tantalus was known to have great wealth, rivaling even King Midas, who had the golden touch. He was so rich there was an expression about him: “The Talents of Tantalus.” There are a number of variations of how Tantalus got into trouble, but I’ll go with the more church-friendly one.

In this version Tantalus was given the privilege of dining with the gods on Mt. Olympus, but it didn’t take long for him to get into hot water with his father—basically a food fight. Tantalus decided it would be a good idea to steal some divine nectar and ambrosia from the dinner table. With no one looking, he snuck the leftovers into a doggy bag. After leaving Mt. Olympus, he served “the nectar of the gods” to mere mortals on earth. In a fit of rage, Zeus consigned Tantalus to Hades where he was made to stand in a pool of water that he could never drink from. Each time he bent down to drink and slake his thirst, the water would drain. Not only that, Tantalus was positioned below a tree with some delicious low-hanging fruit. Each time he reached for the fruit, it would pull away from his grasp. For all eternity Tantalus was perpetually hungry and thirsty, with food and drink always just out of reach. And that’s where we get the word “tantalizing”—from Tantalus.

When we hunger for the wrong things, we feel a lot like Tantalus. Our life and our world become a living hell of frustrating attempts to nourish ourselves with that carrot we can never quite reach. But the good news is that Jesus blesses rather than curses our hunger. He wants to commune with us and to nourish us at his table. He helps heal our literal and spiritual eating and drinking disorders. He redirects our appetites in healthy and life giving ways. He wants us to taste and see that the Lord is good.

But even so, that forbidden fruit’s still tantalizing— for Adam and Eve, for Tantalus, and for us. It looks so juicy and enticing and we think it will satisfy us— but it’s rotten to the core. It doesn’t fill us up with what we need. It leaves us high and dry every time.

An English poet wrote about this existential dilemma nearly six decades ago:

*I can't get no satisfaction
I can't get no satisfaction
'Cause I try, and I try, and I try,
I can't get no, I can't get no*

But Jesus, the Second Adam, did it right. Full of the Spirit, Jesus was tempted in the wilderness by Satan after fasting for forty days and forty nights. The tempter said to him,

“If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread.”

But Jesus answered and quoted from Deuteronomy:

“It is written, man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.”

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness," says Jesus, "for they will be filled."

Throughout Jesus's ministry he showed us how to hunger and thirst for righteousness.

"My food," says Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work." (John 4:34)

And so we cry out to God for our daily bread, we look to Jesus who is the bread from heaven, partake of the Lord's Supper of the bread and cup, and nourish ourselves with the bread of God's Word. Blessed are those who HUNGER AND THIRST.

I think Jesus is talking about literal hunger and thirst here—empty stomachs and parched mouths. Jesus cared about food and hunger—he fed the multitudes, had compassion on them. He wanted the disciples to feed them too. Jesus cooked fish for the disciples. Jesus cares about the hungry and thirsty. As followers of Christ, we must too. And we do. But Jesus is also talking about spiritual hunger and thirst. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. The Psalms help us with this:

"My soul thirsts for God, the living God... My flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water...my soul is satisfied as with a rich feast."

Notice Jesus doesn't say, "Blessed are the righteous." This is very, very important. Don't miss it. Rather he says,

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness."

God takes seriously our longings, our hopes, our desires—even if we don't always live up to them. Even if we lack what we long for.

I like how William Barclay puts it, "God judges us not only by our achievements, but by our dreams." The good news is you don't have to arrive and achieve first in order to be blessed. The blessedness of emptiness knows that it's God that supplies all our needs. It's a gift from above.

But we are summoned to hunger for the right things. God loves us right where we are, But God loves us too much to leave us there. So, be famished for righteousness. Don't merely want it, be desperate for righteousness. Don't give up, keep pressing in. If you fall, get back up again and keep trying.

I love how Father Jacques Philippe puts it in his book on the Beatitudes "The Eight Doors of the Kingdom:"

"God himself asks us not to leave him in peace as long as his promises of salvation are not entirely fulfilled."

So we keep praying, keep longing. We don't give up hope—for ourselves and for the world. We seek to invest in our children and grandchildren. We pray for that loved one struggling with mental health and addiction. We keep praying for justice for the people of Ukraine. We feel the hunger pangs of righteousness unfulfilled. This is the blessedness of this beatitude: Your desire to please God, *pleases* God. And if you don't have the desire to desire God, ask God to give you the desire to desire God!"

As Jesus says later in the Sermon on the Mount:

"Ask and it will be given to you. Seek and you will find, Knock and the door will be opened unto you."

And also:

"Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness," says Jesus, "and all these things will be added unto you."

God will fill your needs. Hunger for God's righteousness, not your own self-righteousness.

In other words, leave your ego at the door. Better yet, leave your ego on the cross. God provides, but we have no bragging rights. I like how Soren Kierkegaard put it over a century and a half ago,

"Man's supreme perfection is to be in need of God."

This is The Great Reversal Jesus repeatedly talks about: Perfection comes through imperfection. The "unright" are made "right." The "out" are made "in." Those who "don't have" *"will have."* You can't change your past, but the good news is that your history doesn't have to be your destiny. Keep hungering and thirsting for righteousness. Think about it. If God's blessings came to only those who achieved righteousness, no one would be blessed. So stop beating yourself up over your imperfections. Start asking for God's righteousness, not your own.

You don't have to be a perfect cook to love food. You can be a bad cook and you can still love food. I'm the perfect example of that. But we do for sure have a number of good cooks here at IPC! Don't be half-baked about your hunger. Don't be satisfied with partial goodness—go for the whole enchilada. Be all in. The word "filled" Jesus uses literally means "stuffed." Hunger for the whole thing. Don't just nibble—feast upon God's righteousness—but also know the best is yet to come in the hereafter.

So right where you are, wherever you are, desire to be stronger in your faith. Thirst for transformation, for growth—in you individually and in the world. Hunger after God. Don't settle for spiritual junk food and empty calories. Go for the main course. The main course is righteousness. The Scriptures teach God is righteous and just.

"The Lord is just in all his ways and kind in all his doings." (Psalm 145:17)

Righteousness is living the way that God requires—doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God. (Micah 6:8) The gift of Christ's righteousness empowers us to be righteous and just. This righteousness is expressed in two ways:

- First, there's **inner righteousness**: An "in here" righteousness (*touch the heart*). It means doing what's right in your own life: to have upright character, conduct, and motives. Making wise and godly decisions. Leo Tolstoy once said,

"Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself."

Jesus is talking about personal righteousness. But there's also a second expression of righteousness, that's equally important.

- Jesus also calls us to hunger for an **outer righteousness** beyond ourselves: An “out there” righteousness. Collective. Where we long for societal justice out there in the world. We ask, “how are we doing?” The Hebrew prophets teach us about this, over and over.

We express this outer righteousness in “**word**”:

- We share the good news with everyone.
- We want others to come to faith, to enjoy God.
- We want God to be better known and loved.

But we also express it in “**deed**”. We seek to uphold the dignity of others, to work for justice and mercy in society:

- Feeding the hungry.
- Protecting Human Rights.
- Working for peace and reconciliation.
- We hunger for God’s righteousness to be done in the face of evil and injustice.

To long for justice is to long for God’s love, to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. And to love our neighbor as ourselves. The Great Commandment. (Mark 12:30-31) One theologian calls this righteousness TOTAL JUSTICE: love of God and love of neighbor, friendship with God and friendship with others.

So, righteousness is about **good relationship**:

- Vertical Relationship with **God** and
- Horizontal Relationship with **human beings**

—**all people**, but particularly the despised, vulnerable, forgotten, and oppressed. You can’t pick and choose. We need both. “Hungering” and “thirsting” for righteousness is a dance—a dance with the divine and the human. God’s action and human action, graciously synchronized and coordinated to work for goodness and holiness.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they WILL BE filled.” Notice the future tense. They are blessed NOW. God satisfies us in the present—partially. This is the already. But it is in the future that fullness will come—the not yet. Whether partially in the present or fully in the future, **God fills us with what endures, what lasts, and what is life-giving.**
God fills us—with himself.

Amen.

Sermon Art: “*Cup and Knife*” by Richard Diebenkorn 1964

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