

Blessed Are Those Who Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness
From the Series, “The King and I – Matthew Tells Us About the King of the Universe”
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Introduction

When I was young, my family (like many families) would sometimes go on road trips. I recall one trip in particular. In my family, I had one brother and one sister. Whenever we went on trips, we kids all got piled into the back seat. Adults sat in the front. On this trip, my grandmother came along. So, she sat in the front passenger seat, and my mother drove.

Keeping kids entertained and quiet on long trips can be a challenge. One technique is to have snacks handy. Depending on how disciplined parents want to be, those snacks can vary. A snack might be something fun like chips or cookies, or a snack can be something “healthier” like fruit. At one point early in the trip, my grandmother made the following statement: “We need to stop and eat”.



Being kids, this didn’t seem to make sense. Didn’t we have plenty of food? We had chips and cookies. When we protested, my grandmother answered, “But you see, children, we need some *real* food.” She then added, “If I go too long without real food, I get a headache”. Well, who wants their grandmother to get sick? So, we stopped shortly after that to eat “real food”.

Have you ever been in a similar situation? You get hungry. You don’t feel right. So, you eat. Then you feel better. Now, the type of food matters at times like these. Depending on what you eat, you might feel better, or, if you don’t eat the right kind of food, you might feel worse.

You might be surprised to find that the Bible talks a lot about food. Sometimes it literally talks about food. At other times, though, it uses food and eating as illustrations of deeper spiritual truths.

Today, we’re going to see Jesus use eating as an illustration of one of the deepest spiritual truths in the Scripture. Let’s read, starting at the first sentence of the “Beatitudes”: situations where people are said to be “blessed”.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
(Matthew 5:3-6)

To understand this, we need to ask some questions.

I. What does it mean to hunger?

The first question is, “What does it mean to hunger?” The answer may seem obvious, but let’s talk about it.

I remember once visiting a family with a baby. The baby had been quietly napping for some time while the adults had a good conversation. Then, we all heard that sound - The sound of a baby crying off in the distance. The mother looked at her watch and simply said, “time to feed the baby”.

The feeling of hunger goes so far back in our personal development, that no one is even able to remember the first time they felt it. If we didn’t come out of the womb hungry, we had the feeling shortly after being born.

We all know what it’s like to be hungry. It’s universal. Every language has a word for it. A little while back, I saw an article entitled, “How to say, “I’m Hungry” in 10 different languages”. It’s one of the first things you need to learn if you want to be a world traveler.

Along with hunger is thirst. We hunger for food - we thirst for water. We can mix all kinds of things into water, but it’s the water we want.

II. The Source of These Feelings

Now, why do we have these feelings? This is important: ***These feelings tell us that something is wrong.*** We run on food – it’s our fuel. In the incredible things called our bodies, God has placed mechanisms that store digested food as fat. However, our bodies can only hold so much. If we run out, bad things happen to our bodies.

Water allows certain chemical reactions to happen in our bodies. It cools us when we’re hot. On a hot day, we sweat. Again, God has placed mechanisms in our bodies that store this vital element. But again, we can only hold so much. When we run out, other bad things happen.

So, along with the amazing mechanisms God has given us to store food and water, he has given us amazing mechanisms to warn us when we’re running short and need more - The feelings of hunger and thirst.

Fortunately, most people's bodies let us know we're running low long before we run out. These feelings come in degrees. If we need a little food, we get a little hungry. If we need a little water, we get a little bit thirsty. The longer we wait, the stronger these feelings get. We have special words for those times like this: For food we have "famished" and "starving". For water we have words like "parched".

III. The spiritual Truth

OK. We all get this. So, here is where we see the wisdom of God. Jesus uses this common feeling to communicate spiritual truth. He says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for **righteousness**". Why would people do that? Why would they hunger and thirst for righteousness?

As much as we need food, we need righteousness even more. This is where the beatitudes build on each other.

Jesus started by saying, "Blessed are the poor in spirit". We learned when we studied that saying that "poor in spirit" means we are spiritually bankrupt before God. We have sinned and this places us in a state where we are helpless. We can do nothing to save ourselves.

Then Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn". It's one thing to realize that something is broken. It's another to feel sad about it – to regret it – to mourn over our spiritual poverty.

Then Jesus said, "Blessed are the meek". The arrogant person doesn't see any need for God. They get what they want (they think) by using their own power for their own interests. The meek person understands that they are totally dependent on God. And the meek person is happy to receive God's help. From that point forward, they're open to using whatever power God has given them to serve him and others.

This brings us to hungering. So now, we have a person who understands their spiritual poverty. They're mourning over their sin. They're ready to accept God's help. At this point, they begin to understand that there is another side to sin. Sin isn't just that we've done wrong. ***Sin is that we haven't done right.***

The great Hebrew King David said something amazing in Psalm 19: "The heavens declare the glory of God." (Psalm 19:1) Almost everything in all the universe on some level glorifies God. They glorify God because they were created to do that.

There are only two things that don't glorify God. These are the beings that God created with the ability to make choices. Angels were created to make choices. Some chose to disobey. We call those "fallen angels" or demons. Fortunately, there were lots of angels who chose to obey and follow God. We call those the good angels, or often, just "angels" for short.

Humans were created to make choices. Sadly, we too chose to disobey. So, we are part of a small group in the universe that does not glorify God. We don't do what is right.

But then, God touches our hearts. Jesus once told us that we need to be born again. (John 3:3) When we are born the first time, in the natural way, we are born with a problem. We're born in sin. We don't have a lot of space to explain this, so let me just hit the subject on a high level. When the first humans, Adam and Eve, were created, they were the parents of the whole human race. When they sinned, when they disobeyed, when they did wrong, they brought all of humankind under a curse. Because of their actions, we are all born in sin. King David, who we mentioned earlier, wrote this:

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.
Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight;
so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge.
Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.
(Psalm 51:3-5)

This is another reason we're bankrupt before God.

When a child is born through natural means, they begin to hunger for food soon after birth. When a person is born again, when their spirit is made alive by the Holy Spirit, they begin to hunger for what they haven't had their whole natural life. ***They hunger and thirst for righteousness.***

The reason righteousness is more important than food and water is this: We need food and water to live, but we live to glorify God. Food and water just help us to fulfill our purpose.

IV. The Reward

Now, when Jesus gave the beatitudes, there was always a reward. Let's read what Jesus has told his disciples so far:

3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit,
(Me: Why? Why are they blessed?) ***for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.***
4 Blessed are those who mourn,
(Why?) ***for they will be comforted.***
5 Blessed are the meek,
(Why?) ***for they will inherit the earth.***
6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
(Why?) ***for they will be filled.***
Matthew 5:3-6 (Amplified)

Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be rewarded. They will be filled.

The word that is translated “filled” here is interesting. Some modern translators use the word “satisfied”. “Filled” and “Satisfied” are similar ideas. Have you ever been hungry and had some food, and then thought to yourself, “That wasn’t quite *enough*”? You’d like more. You’ve eaten. Maybe you’ve eaten something healthy? But you’re not **satisfied**.

Now imagine that you’re visiting a restaurant with a buffet. Buffets have had different names through the years. Some call them “Meal bars”. The Swedish people had a good word for “buffet”. They called it a “Smorgasbord”.

Ah! At a buffet, a Smorgasbord, you can go back as many times as you want. Salad, main course, meats, and of course, dessert. There is no need to stop before you’re satisfied, full, maybe even stuffed.

That last word, “stuffed” is interesting because that’s one of the ways the original Greek word is used. It can be used for fattening an animal. If a wealthy person threw a big party and wanted to show off, they would take a calf and overfeed it every day from the day it was born until the time of the party. This resulted in what was called a “fattened calf”.

Yep – that’s the word here. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Why?

- Because they will be filled.
- They will be satisfied.
- They will be *stuffed*.

V. How God Does This

How does God do this? He does it in two ways.

1) First, he does it through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross.

A number of things happened at the Cross. Christians know that Jesus paid the price for our sin. That’s wonderful. But God does more than that. He doesn’t only pay the debt created by our sin. He then gives us the righteousness of Christ.

Here’s how he does it: He places us **into** Christ. The Apostle Paul wrote about this. Prior to meeting Jesus, Paul thought that the goal of a believer was to perform all kinds of good works under his own power. But then, he met Jesus and learned about the real path to salvation. Here’s what he said about all his supposed good works:

I consider them (those works) garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. (Phil 3:8b-9)

So, when we're born again, we're placed into Christ. We don't have any righteousness, so Jesus gives us his. That's plenty of righteousness. We start as spiritual paupers – through Jesus we become spiritually wealthy.

2) He empowers us to serve him.

What is the second way? There's a passage that I often quote to people. It's found in the book of Ephesians, chapter 2. I always read verses 8-9 of that chapter. But here, we need to include verse 10.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (Ephesians 2:8-10)

When we're born again, we begin to hunger and thirst for righteousness. We want to do good things to honor and glorify God. So, God helps us! He has prepared good works for us to do. And he helps us to do those good works through the power of his holy Spirit.

VI. Old Testament Passages

As we've been studying the Christian Manifesto together, we've been reminded each time that much of what Jesus is saying isn't brand new. Believers throughout the ages have come to this point.

Remember, we've learned in our series that the book of Psalms is a songbook. It contains songs and hymns that the people in the days of Jesus used as they worshipped. So, they were familiar with what the Psalms said.

As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?
(Psalm 42:1-2)

The writer here says he feels like a deer who runs around on a hot day and can't find any water. The animal pants. It's uncomfortable. Only whereas the deer needs water, the writer here needs God. He needs to worship God and to meet with God.

Now, we've gone another step deeper into spiritual truth. We've gone past longing for personal righteousness to longing for God himself. The writer here longs for God in his life. He longs for worship.

A few verses later he writes this:

Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.
(Psalm 42:5)

Remember when I said my Grandmother would get ill if she didn't get real food? Well, this man says, when he can't worship God, he gets spiritually ill. His soul feels downcast. The only cure is to put his hope in God. He longs to praise God. And he knows that when he does that, God will come through.

We see something similar in Psalm 84

How lovely is your dwelling place, Lord Almighty!
My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord;
my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.
(Psalm 84:1-2)

When we don't eat and drink, we get tired. Maybe we faint. This writer says it's the same thing when he can't enter the courts of the living God to worship.

So, when Jesus gave the statements that we're calling his manifesto, Jesus knew that his followers were familiar with these ideas.

VII. Why wouldn't we hunger?

Now, this brings us to an interesting question. Why does Jesus have to make this statement? Why does he have to talk about hungering and thirsting for righteousness? Well, many people don't hunger and thirst for God. Why not?

Remember that road trip I told you about when I was a kid? We had chips and cookies, so we weren't hungry. This is a big problem for lots of people. Imagine that dinner is at 7:00 in the evening. You're going to a good restaurant with great food. However, at 5, you get hungry. So, you eat a few cookies. You know what happens? When you sit down at the good restaurant, ***you're not hungry.***

We live in a broken world. Our world offers all kinds of distractions that are like those cookies. They make us feel OK for a little while, but in the long run they don't help us to deal with the real longings inside of us. So, we get involved more with those distractions. And, we're still not satisfied.

I could spend all kinds of time talking about the bad reactions that happen in our souls when we fill our lives with spiritual "junk food." Our souls are downcast. We feel empty. Maybe we walk around angry. We're certainly not growing spiritual as disciples of Christ.

Now, I could create a list, but I often find that I only have to ask this question: Do you have things in your life that are like that? Do you have “spiritual junk food”? Then I just have to wait a second. Many people can easily create their own list.

Once you have your list, there’s an easy way to find out how bad your list is. Ask: Do you find that you’re uninterested in the things of God? Is it easy to skip out of church? Has it been too long since you’ve opened a Bible on your own? How long has it been since you’re prayed and felt confident that God was listening? If you’re finding these things in your life, maybe some distractions have come in. Maybe you have spiritual junk food?

Some people even find they can come to church and be uninterested. I worry when I’m in the front of a church on Sunday morning, and I see people looking at their cell phones. Or their toes, or their fingernails. You get the picture.

Practical application for today

Let me give you a challenge. Right now, our world is facing a crisis. Because of the pandemic, lots of things are shut down. Things that would normally distract us. Sadly, other things have popped up to distract: New video games, new movies, new online experiences.

What if you shut the computer off? What if you put the cell phone or tablet away? Grab a Bible. Read. Every day. Start at the beginning of the New Testament and just read something. Maybe you’ll read a little – maybe you’ll read a lot. And start to pray. Talk with God about the things you read.

Maybe you could find a good spiritual book to read? Something by a Christian author? If you need a suggestion for a good book contact me: Pastor@TrinityTeaneck.org

Fortunately, the parks are opening. Maybe you could find a quiet place and reflect. Early in our study of Matthew’s Gospel, we learned how a wilderness experience can be a vital part of the Christian walk.

If you haven’t already, it’s time to eat some spiritual food - Some real food.

Conclusion

A long time ago, I went on a trip with my family. I had an experience that turned out to have important spiritual ramifications. We all need to eat. When it comes time to eat, there’s real food, and there’s junk food. Junk food has a way of making you think you don’t need the real thing.

Jesus told his disciples that people who hunger and thirst for righteousness are blessed. They will be filled.

As always, there are two kinds of people listening.

To the first, this is new. You've gone through your whole life, and it's been too easy to stay away from church and the things of God. That's because you've never been born again. There are things about your life that don't satisfy you. Your soul feels downcast – or worse.

Here's another saying from the Bible based on eating: Taste and see that the LORD is good... (Psalm 34:8). Contact us and let us know how you can experience real satisfaction now and for eternity through Jesus Christ. You can find us on the web at: www.TrinityTeaneck.org.

Others have been in churches for a long time. But you've been letting some spiritual junk food into your life. You've let yourself become distracted. Now is the time to come back to the table. Once again, if you need some suggestions on how to do that, contact me – I'm happy to help.

Remember the promise of Jesus: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."