

Lenten Sermon Series 2009

*Beatitudes 4: Hungering for God*

Psalm 107:1-9; Matthew 4:1-11

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“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.” That’s our Beatitude for the day, and it is one of the ones that Luke shares with Matthew, only as usual Luke is much more worldly. “Blessed are those who hunger,” he says. Matthew has to spiritualize it, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.” But what does that mean?

I have to confess I have something of a knee-jerk negative reaction to the word “righteousness,” and it’s all Jesus’ fault, really. After all, he’s always harping on the Pharisees for being self-righteous. I’m not sure exactly what it means, but it must be bad if Jesus doesn’t like it, right? So why should this be something we ought to hunger and thirst for? And yet I’m not reading it correctly. What Jesus criticizes is *self*-righteousness. Plain old righteousness, on the other hand, is a different matter. In fact, at one point Jesus says that his disciples need to be even more righteous than the Pharisees. So what is he really talking about here?

The Pharisees were a popular religious movement during the time of the Roman conquest of Judea. The Romans controlled both the Jewish government and the Temple leadership, so a grass-roots movement arose that moved the focus of Jewish life way from the Temple and the system of sacrifice, and focused instead on ordinary Jews in their everyday lives, who could follow the law of Moses on their own without the need for the Temple. The Pharisees followed those laws very strictly, to the point where they sometimes emphasized those laws above all other considerations – even the needs of other people. It became a kind of spiritual competition to see who was holiest by following the laws down to the tiniest detail.

But the rules in themselves were good, Jesus said. It’s not that the Pharisees were doing something bad. All of those laws in the book of Leviticus are meant to help people love God and love their neighbors as they loved themselves, and that, Jesus said, is the sum of all the law and the prophets. This is why Jesus said he did not come to abolish the law. So Jesus didn’t take the Pharisees to task because they followed the law. He took them to task because they saw the law as an end in itself, a way of being holy or righteous, rather than seeing the law as a means to an end, that is the love of God and of neighbor. In their zealous pursuit of righteousness through the law, some Pharisees ironically ended up distancing themselves from their neighbors and even from God. They were self-righteous, Jesus said, self-justifying, and not truly righteous at all.

There’s a bit of irony in the way Jesus phrases this Beatitude. He does not say, “Blessed are those who are righteous.” Otherwise, the Pharisees would be jumping around saying, “That’s me! That’s me!” Instead, Jesus says that the blessed are those who *hunger and thirst* for righteousness. If we listen closely, we see that the first four Beatitudes are all phrased in the negative: poverty of spirit, mourning, meekness, hungry and thirsty for righteousness. In other words, blessed are those who do not possess righteousness. Because if you think you have it, then what you really have is *self*-righteousness. In fact, righteousness is something that is given to us, not something we acquire on our own. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.” In other words, righteousness will be given to them.

So what is righteousness? If the sum of the law and the prophets is to love God and love your neighbor as yourself, then this is righteousness: it is being right with God and with our neighbors. Being right with God is something we cannot achieve on our own. The Jesuit Dennis Hamm says “We are to receive righteousness as a gift, and pursue it as a task.” God gives us the gift of being right with God, and our response to that gift is to pursue rightness with one another.

So far so good, but the Beatitude speaks of hungering and thirsting for that rightness. And the fact is, we in this country never really go hungry or thirsty. We have such an abundance of food and drink that, while we do have a need for food pantries and soup kitchens, the reality is that no one really ever starves to death in the United States. We never experience famine in this country. That is for a variety of reasons that I couldn't begin to get into here, but the result is that we in this country never truly hunger or thirst.

But people in Jesus' day had to live with the constant threat of hunger and thirst. They didn't ask, “What will we have for dinner?” but “Do we have anything to eat for dinner?” Thirst too was a great concern, finding sources of water that were not contaminated – an issue that continues to plague much of the world to this day, but not us in this country. We get healthy, safe water for free right out of the tap. A feast for us is to eat lots of yummy things, rare delicacies, food we don't normally have. A feast in Jesus' day was just getting to eat until you were full.

It's definitely a good thing that no one in this country starves to death, and that we all have access to safe drinking water. But there is a spiritual downside to all this abundance. All of this surplus, all of this consumerism, all of this choice becomes something we take for granted. In short, we lose the ability to be grateful.

This point is illustrated by no less an eminent theologian than Miss Manners. You may laugh to hear that I'm a big fan of hers. Other people rush to read the comics in the newspaper. Me, I always look for Miss Manners' column on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. Because she's not about scorning people who use the wrong dinner fork. Rather, she is all about how to treat people with decency and respect. And one of Miss Manners' pet peeves is gift registries, whether for baby showers, wedding showers, or whatever else people have come up with next. This might not seem to make any sense. After all, those gift registries give people a chance to say what they really want, and the givers will know they won't get duplicates. But Miss Manners says they put the emphasis on getting stuff, rather than what gift-giving is supposed to be about, which is a thoughtful gesture from friends and relatives. When we use gift registries, then the recipient is the one who is calling all the shots. The recipient is the one to decide what items will be acceptable, and that can lead to a sense of entitlement. I mean, imagine the horror if someone gives a gift that wasn't on the registry! No, Miss Manners says. The point of gift-giving is not the gift, it's the act of giving itself. And that's why we must always say “thank you” even for that ugly sweater or that hideous tie, because it really and truly is the thought that counts.

That's the danger in living in a land of plenty. We risk focusing on things instead of people. We start to believe that our possessions say more about us than our character does. We may even lose the ability to be grateful. Yet it is also true that even in this land of plenty, deep down inside we know that our abundance does not buy happiness. We realize that we are spending money on food that does not satisfy. We might not be starving, but we do still have cravings. We yearn for more – not just more stuff, but for more meaning. We yearn for wholeness, purpose, joy, love. All of these are the result of being right with God and with one another. Yet that deep-rooted hunger has been reduced in our society to a mere craving, because we stuff ourselves so full of things which do not satisfy.

What this Beatitude is saying is that you've got to take it beyond a simple yearning or craving. You need to hunger and thirst for it. You need to starve for it, be parched for it. And we do that by not filling ourselves up all the way, even by emptying ourselves.

When Jesus was about to begin his ministry, he went alone into the desert for forty days, during which time he did not eat or drink. We can't even imagine such a thing today, but extreme fasts have been practiced throughout history. Jesus chose to deprive himself, to reduce himself to starvation and serious thirst. Why? He did it in order to strengthen his spirit. He did it in order to focus on his mission and clarify what it was he was all about.

But hunger weakens a person, and so the devil appeared to Jesus in order to tempt him. He tempts him by offering Jesus the very gifts he already possessed. After forty days of his fast, Jesus is very hungry, so the devil invites him to turn stones into bread. This is – pardon the pun – a piece of cake to the guy who would later multiply the fish and the loaves, and turn water into wine. If Jesus could do all that, why shouldn't he make some food and break his fast? Yet Jesus refuses, saying, "We shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from God's mouth." Hungering and thirsting for righteousness.

Again the devil tempts Jesus to throw himself off the roof of the Temple. Jesus is God's own son, right? God won't let him come to harm, and indeed Jesus will be able to work great miracles of healing in his ministry. But again Jesus refuses, "You shall not tempt God." God will already protect us, why should we try to force God's hand? It would be an act of ingratitude.

The third time the devil offers Jesus all the world if he will only pay homage to the devil. Personally, I think the devil must be slipping here. Maybe he's getting a bit desperate. Jesus already possesses all the world in his humble, meek way. Everything belongs to him. But he doesn't need to grasp for it or try to hold on to it by force, which is what he would be doing if he paid homage to the devil and his ways of dominance. Homage is due only to God, Jesus says. The only thing truly worth hungering for, yearning for, grasping for, is righteousness, being right with God and with one another. So Satan, scram! Jesus says.

For all of us, though, that last temptation is probably the greatest. How might we be willing to sell our souls in order to possess the earth's riches? Would we, like Esau, sell our birthright for a pot of stew that will be eaten and gone in five minutes? In order not to fall prey to such temptation, we can practice the discipline of the first two: by living not by bread alone but by every word that comes from God, and by not tempting God by not demanding what we might consider to be our due. We can resist temptation by practicing restraint, self-denial, and above all, gratitude for all of God's gifts. We don't need to demand anything of God. God will give us all we want and more, if we hunger and thirst for it.