

**Matthew 5:6 (NIV 1984)**  
***Blessed Are Those Who Pursue Righteousness***

**Introduction**

Today we look at the 4<sup>th</sup> beatitude in Matt. 5:6, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”

To the Chinese, the word “blessed” is a very important and auspicious term. To be blessed is often linked to material prosperity in business, promotion in career, good health, and long life on earth.

For auspicious or festive occasions, Chinese families will deliberately cook more than enough when they eat together. This is to symbolize that life will be so good that there will always be plenty to eat and no one will go hungry. All will be fed full and life will be filled with good abundance.

The 4<sup>th</sup> beatitude is also about being filled and not going hungry or thirsty. But it is about being hungry and thirsty of a non-material kind. It is about a kind of spiritual hunger and thirst—that for righteousness. It is about a pursuit for righteousness.

There are many things that we can pursue here on earth. Jesus here calls His people (and He calls us today) to pursue one thing that is befitting of those who belong to the Kingdom of God. You might say this is one thing that will keep us fit and healthy in Kingdom lifestyle.

It is the same in the physical sense. Taking healthy food is part and parcel of a healthy lifestyle. If you were like me, you would probably find that somehow the less healthy food often tastes better. So we often try to deceive ourselves to think that we are eating such food moderately instead of indulgently.

It is like this man who entered a pizza restaurant and ordered a king-size pizza with extra cheese. When it was ready, the cook asked, “Do you want me to cut it into four pieces or six pieces?” Feeling guilty that he was about to eat up a king-size pizza, the man replied, “You better make it four pieces. I don’t think I can eat six.”

If forbidden fruit tastes better, so is unhealthy food. We like it so much that we often try to deceive ourselves to think that we are eating such food without indulging.

In the 4<sup>th</sup> beatitude, Jesus teaches that there’s a certain thing we need to pursue if we are to live a healthy Kingdom lifestyle. He calls His people to pursue righteousness—to hunger and thirst for righteousness.

**I. To hunger and thirst is to satisfy the human need to be filled.**

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As humans, we have two basic needs—food and water. Hunger and thirst are two powerful drives when we lack food and water. They are powerful because they are our basic instinct for survival—without food and water over a prolonged period, we will die.

When you are hungry, food is not just something that's nice to have. It's something you must have. So is water when you are thirsty. Food and water become the no. 1 priority. In such a situation, your hunger for food and thirst for water become a passionate pursuit.

Hunger and thirst is essential because our body needs food and water to survive and stay healthy. In the same way, hunger and thirst for righteousness is essential if we are to live out our new nature in Jesus Christ; to stay healthy in our spiritual lives. It is essential for us to have this passionate pursuit for righteousness if we are to have a wholesome relationship with the Lord.

When Jesus says that “blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled”, He is calling His people to passionately desire God and godliness. The words “hunger” and “thirst” are two terms used to emphasize this same passion. So I will talk only about hunger this morning, but with the idea of thirst incorporated as well. Jesus is calling His people to hunger, to have a passion for righteousness, to have a strong appetite for the things of God.

What does a baby cry for when he is hungry? He cries for milk. You give him milk. You don't even have to teach the baby to cry for milk. If the baby is healthy and normal, his natural response is to cry for milk when he is hungry, even demands it.

A mother may not be particularly delighted to get up in the middle of the night to feed her crying child. But how would she feel if the baby just sleeps through the night since day 1 without any hunger for milk? Yes, no disturbance to one's sleep, but no, it is worrying because this lack of appetite could mean that the child is somehow not healthy or normal.

In the same way, a healthy spiritual appetite is indicative of our spiritual health; that we are growing and maturing well in the Christian life. A healthy Kingdom lifestyle is one characterized by an evident passion for righteousness.

This hungering that is a strong desire and craving will only be there when we intentionally create emptiness in us—an emptiness that cries out to God for filling. We will lose much of this spiritual appetite or hunger if we allow our souls to be filled with other things. It's the same in the physical sense—if I have a super heavy lunch, I will likely have a poor appetite for dinner because I have not left enough space in my stomach for that.

We need to create this emptiness in us that cries out to God for filling—that God-shaped space that no one else or nothing else can fill except God Himself. But we often try to fill that space with something else—e.g. for adults, it is often their work; for young people, it is often their studies. Now while all these other things are important, we will do harm to ourselves when we do not create space (when we do not create margins) to allow for the things of God in our lives.

Yes, Jesus calls His people to cultivate a healthy spiritual appetite for righteousness.

## **II. The righteousness that Jesus has in mind.**

The moment a person commits himself to trust and obey Christ as Saviour and Lord, he stands legally right before God who judges him as “not guilty”. Jesus was teaching the 4<sup>th</sup> beatitude primarily to His people, telling them how they should live as people of God’s Kingdom. So the righteousness that Jesus was calling His people to hunger for is not so much this right legal standing before God—they already had it. But to enter God’s Kingdom and have a legally right standing before Him is only the beginning. Yes, it is a once-for-all declaration of “not guilty” before God in Jesus Christ, but it is not just about securing a ticket to safety in Heaven.

The righteousness that Jesus was calling His people to hunger for has to do with a passionate desire to be like Christ, and to express the new nature we have in Jesus Christ in the practical, daily activities of life. God has declared us “righteous” when we place our faith and trust in Jesus Christ. And in daily obedience to Jesus Christ, we are to passionately live out this life of righteousness in Jesus Christ—this is our way of loving the Lord and growing in Him. God has not told us, “You belong to me in Jesus Christ for sure. Now go and live like my ways and will do not matter in your life.” Rather, He has told us, “Be holy as I am holy now that you belong to me.”

So the Lord wants us to pursue a lifestyle that reflects the new nature of righteousness we have in Jesus Christ. That’s befitting of us as those who belong to God’s Kingdom of righteousness. But if you are like me, you will realize that you cannot pursue everything you like at the same time and with the same intensity. In other words, we have to intentionally choose what we will pursue and with what intensity. And when we choose one thing there is ultimately not enough time for something else. The most common reasons for not pursuing something are:

- “I would like to, I want to, but I just don’t have enough time.”
- “I would like to spend quality time with my family. But I’m too tired after more than 10 hours at the office. I’ve got to get some rest. I just don’t have the time.”
- “I know I ought to pray more and I want to study deeper the Word, but I am always hard pressed for time.”

A woman came to her pastor and confided, “Pastor, can you tell my husband to spend less time with his work and more time with us—just a little more time?”

The pastor met with the husband and said, “Your wife has asked me to let you know that she and the children would like to have more time with you.”

The man replied defensively, “But pastor, don’t they understand that I am working myself crazy only because I want them to be more comfortable in life?”

Pastor told the wife this, and she said, “Please tell him that we already have enough. What we need is not more material comfort, but more of him.”

Pastor conveyed these sentiments to the man. This time, the man looked wickedly at the pastor and said, “Pastor, I am actually following your example. Your family is also moaning that they do not have more of you. The only difference is that you can always spiritualize what you are doing.”

Indeed, this tension is very real for everyone, regardless of what we do in life—always not enough time to do the really needful and important things in God’s sight.

We also seem to have little time to pursue this righteousness that Jesus was talking about—right with God, right with people, right in the principles we live by. But is time really the big issue?

I believe the real issue is not time, but priorities. Each and every one of us only has enough time to do what? We only have time to do our priorities. With the 24 hours we all have each day, some things are going to get done and some other things are not going to get done. This is where our responsibility lies—we decide our own priorities. We decide what will get done and what won’t get done.

So the point to begin with if we choose to hunger for righteousness is not with our time, but with our priorities. And prioritizing doesn’t mean cutting DOWN on everything so that we can have some of everything. Rather, it means cutting OUT something so that we can have some other thing that we have decided to be a priority.

And if we decide righteousness is priority, it will dramatically affect our schedules.

- If I am pursuing a more prayerful life, I will find time to commune with God.
- If I am pursuing a deeper understanding of God's Word, I will find time for the Bible.
- If I am pursuing to bless others in His name, I will find time to minister to them.
- If I am pursuing to get right with God, I will find time and courage to ask God to deal with me.

The evidence of our pursuit of righteousness is found in the way we invest our time. But even if we want to make time for it, it must first be a priority.

### **III. How we nurture a priority to pursue righteousness.**

*First, we need to recognize the value of righteousness.*

Value it enough to make it a priority. "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added unto you" (Matt. 6:33).

You remember the rich man who came to Jesus. He could not give away his earthly possessions even though he had more than enough material wealth to feed himself over two life spans. You remember the poor woman at the temple gate. She could only drop in her two copper coins (all that she had) as giving herself totally to God. The rich man had not made it a priority to give to God, but the poor woman had. It is not about how much you have, but where your priority is. Until it is our priority there will never be enough to give to God and His work.

Similarly, if seeking godliness is something we do after we do everything else, it won't happen. As God's people, we are "in the world, but not of the world". Yes, we live in this world but we live for God's purpose. The busyness of life often tunes us only to the good news of the world (e.g. good jobs, good pay), not to the Good News of God (i.e. people need Jesus Christ and Christians are God's channels of love). But the good news of the world may not actually be good news for our soul.

A woman called her husband at work. He explained that he was very busy and asked her if she could wait till he came home.

The wife said that she just wanted to share some good news and bad news. The busy husband needed to get off the phone, and so he said, "Just give me the good news."

His wife answered, "Dear, I have found that the air bags of our new car work very well."

Is this good news or bad news?

The busyness of life often tunes us only to the good news of the world (good jobs, good pay), not to the Good News of God (people need Jesus Christ and Christians are God's channels of love). But the good news of the world may not actually be good news for our soul.

*Second, we need to stay away from those things that would kill our appetite for God.*

Some things are okay in moderation. But they can harm us if we over-indulge. They will not enhance our pursuit of God, not increase our appetite for God and His kingdom, but will take up so much space that we have no space left for God in our lives. Are we having too much newspaper, too much TV, too much computer, too much fun and leisure, too much work and socializing? We must refuse such over-indulgence if we want to resist their influence upon our lives. Starve on what God wants you to die to, and feed on what God wants you to grow in.

*Third, we need to intentionally feed our desire for more of God.*

In this world, we are spoilt for choices. If worship is to stir our desire towards God, then we need to intentionally spend time counting our blessings and giving thanks to Him. If reading Scripture is to tune our ears to God, then we need to intentionally spend time in the Word, and hear the heartbeat of God.

Many people lose their hunger for spiritual things because they think that if they wait long enough, it will come/return to them. They don't intentionally cultivate it. And as they wait, the hunger in their spirit becomes weaker and eventually they suffer from spiritual malnutrition—too much junk food that does not feed the soul well. One of the first signs of physical illness is loss of appetite. It is also true of illness of the spirit when we lost our appetite for spiritual things. Whenever we sense this happening to us, we must not wait and do nothing, but must intentionally work on regaining our spiritual appetite.

*Fourth, check our attitude towards the Lord.*

Oh yes, we know He is with us when we worship in church. But so what? Oh yes, we know what He says in the Bible. But so what? Often we have become so familiar with Christian things that we take the Lord's presence and His Word for granted, especially when we are in the habit of getting busy with merely doing Christian things without pausing for deep reflection and contemplation.

This was Martha's problem when Jesus came to her home. If you are familiar with that story in Luke 10:38-42, you will notice how Martha totally neglected Jesus' presence as she was busy with her cooking chores. She felt that doing for Jesus was more important than being with Jesus, that what she was cooking for Jesus was more important than what Jesus was saying to her. All her busyness was eventually disapproved by the Lord because she ended up

complaining to Him about her sister (Mary) rather than appreciating Him for visiting. Conversely, Mary was commended because she sat still at Jesus' feet and listened to His words even though she was not physically busy with anything.

Our action-oriented lifestyle always says to us, "The more busy the action, the better it is." So we become strangers to being still and silent before God. We feel uneasy about practicing solitude—still and alone with God in His presence.

The danger of getting too busy is that we can run on empty because we fall into the same problem as Martha. We lost our intimacy with the Lord in the midst of all our busyness—what we do in His name has pulled us so far away from His presence and His Word. So we need to intentionally put down the "spades" for a while and learn to be still before the Lord, spending time not in His work, but in His presence and communing with Him. Ministry is important, but it can only be sustained and God-centred if His people also take time to be renewed in their communion with Him. This is what we call soul care.

## Conclusion

There's a contemporary version of Psalm 23 that I wish to share with you as I close.<sup>1</sup>

The clock is my dictator, I shall not rest.  
 It makes me lie down only when exhausted.  
 It leads me into great depression, it hounds my soul.  
 It leads me in circles of frenzy for activity sake.  
 Even though I run frantically from task to task, I'll never get it all done.  
 For "my ideal" is with me.  
 Deadlines and the need for approval, they drive me.  
 They demand performance from me beyond the limits of my schedule.  
 Surely fatigue and time pressure shall follow me all the days of my life.  
 And I will dwell in the bonds of frustration forever.

Perhaps this version more truly reflects our life than that recorded in the Bible. But the great promise from the Lord is that He has something better for us. When we see the contrast of this contemporary version of Psalm 23 with the biblical version, it is easy to see that some of our pursuits may not be benefiting us as much as we have hoped they would.

What are you pursuing in life? Is that pursuit resulting in quietness, rest, and fulfilment; or in turmoil and exhaustion? There is a pursuit that brings fulfilment and satisfaction to our lives. It is not a direct pursuit of happiness but a divine pursuit of righteousness to renew/regain our appetite for the things of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Miltonberger, "Contact" Vol. 52 No. 2, p. 7.

2 Tim. 2:22 reads: “Flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart.”

Perhaps God is stirring your heart this morning to take a step in that direction.

*Pray that the Lord will help us seek to be filled with what counts for eternity—  
i.e. His righteousness and not merely the right things of this world.*

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”

Amen!