

Alive in an Olympic-Sized Craving
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Series: The Beatitudes: People in Synch
Title: Alive in an Olympic-Sized Craving
Text: Matthew 5:3-12

I have good news for you today. Actually, Jesus has good news for you and me today. According to the writers of the Gospel, Jesus of Nazareth comes into the towns and cities of first century Palestine announcing good news. Here it is: “the time is fulfilled, The kingdom of God has come near” (Mark 1:15)

It is time! It is time for the future to spill over into the present (G.E. Ladd). It is time for Heaven to invade earth! Really good news! In Jesus the Kingdom of light is breaking into the Kingdom of darkness. In Jesus the Kingdom of justice is breaking into the Kingdom of oppression. In Jesus the Kingdom of life is invading and displacing the Kingdom of death! Are we surprised that Jesus follows the announcement of this good news with the call, “repent and believe”? “Turn around and put your weight in the Gospel?” What can He say? “It is time. Gods new world order has come near: make a U-turn in the road and throw yourselves on me!

And when we do something happens. A new Kind of humanity begins to emerge in the city. A new kind of humanity Jesus is describing in the collection of sayings we call “the Beatitudes”.

I invite you today to focus on the fourth of Jesus’ eight Beatitudes. Matthew chapter 5, verse 6: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they shall be satisfied”.

In this fourth Beatitude Jesus draws us into what will be the major theme of His famous Sermon on the Mount. Indeed in this fourth Beatitude Jesus draws us into the major theme of what it means to be human.

Now whenever we focus on just one of the Beatitudes, we need to make sure we see and hear it along with the other seven. So let us once again read them all. Matthew chapter 5, verses 3-10. I will say the “Blessed are” clause and will you respond with the “for theirs, for they” clause. Matthew 5, vs 3-10.

“Blessed, right-on, in synch with the really real are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they and they alone shall be satisfied.

Let us first make sure we are hearing Jesus clearly. Jesus is not in His fourth Beatitude, saying, “Blessed are those who feel righteous”. Jesus is not here saying, “Blessed are those who are on their way to being righteous” Although that is something He could say in certain contexts.

Jesus is not saying “Blessed are those who are declared righteous” Although that is something He can say in light of His work on the cross. Jesus is here saying, “Blessed are those who knowingly unrighteous, are hungry and thirsty for righteousness. They, and they alone, shall be filled.

As I have been suggesting this far this series of studies the qualities Jesus congratulates in His Beatitudes are not natural human qualities. That is, we do not and cannot produce them. I cannot all of a sudden decide to become poor in Spirit or gentle or pure in heart. I cannot all of a sudden decide to hunger and thirst for righteousness. Rather the qualities Jesus congratulates come into being by the life-giving power of His goodness. They are what emerge in us when Jesus and His Gospel of the Kingdom grab hold of us.

Jesus walks into our lives call us to follow Him. And by His grace causes His Kingdom, His reign to break in. And something happens. We become poor in spirit. We begin to mourn in a whole new way. And we begin to hunger and thirst as never before. We begin to crave as never before.

In Jesus, Immanuel, God with us we begin to taste God’s new world order. As a result we become painfully aware of how far short we have fallen. We realize our spiritual bankruptcy and utter helplessness. And THEN because of what we experience in Jesus we hunger and thirst as never before. We begin to crave with an Olympic sized craving.

Now, I need to be more precise at this point. I said that the qualities Jesus blesses in the Beatitudes are not natural human qualities. What I mean is, they are not natural human qualities for humanity-under-the-reign-of-sin. I need to make this clarification because as a matter of fact we were originally created to naturally long for righteousness. I have not yet said what is meant by “righteousness”. But we were hard wired to desire righteousness.

Sadly, sin entered the picture. And, sadly, we gave into its power. And, sadly, that natural human longing got twisted and distorted. And in the mix, all other natural human longings also got twisted and distorted and became more dominant. Now more than righteousness, we crave food and drink, comfort and pleasure, wealth and fame. Need I illustrate?

In His fourth Beatitude Jesus is announcing good news. He comes into our lives, enters into all our hungers and thirsts and restores in us the hunger and thirst for which we were made.

And in the process heals all the other natural cravings which, by the power of sin have been twisted, some into addictions. The Saviour of the world causes His Kingdom to break into our worlds, and re-wires our distorted hungers and thirsts.

The hunger and thirst for righteousness does not displace the hunger and thirst for food or drink. How could it, given that we are physical creatures who need physical sustenance? However, hunger and thirst for righteousness does heal the hunger and thirst for food and drink, by delivering it from compulsiveness. The hunger and thirst for righteousness does not negate the hunger and thirst for sexual intimacy. It heals that deep hunger and thirst by delivering us from obsession. The hunger and thirst for righteousness does not kill the hunger and thirst for greatness. It heals the quest for greatness by delivering it from ego-centrality. Jesus comes and reforms our appetites.

“Blessed, in synch, are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they and only they shall be satisfied”.

OK. It is time to move forward on the word “righteousness” What does this term mean? There is no way we can exaggerate the place “righteousness” has in the Biblical story. We encounter it everywhere in the Bible. In Genesis. In Exodus. In Deuteronomy big time. In the psalms. “Your righteousness, O LORD, endures forever” “You will lead me in the path of righteousness for Your name’s sake”. “Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your throne”. “The heaven declares His righteousness”. “You righteousness, O Lord, is like to mighty mountains”. We encounter it in Proverbs. In the Prophets. In the letter of the Apostle Paul. His magnum opus, his letter to the Romans is one ??? ??? with righteousness. It is everywhere in our songs and hymns. And it is everywhere in the teaching and preaching of Jesus. The whole Sermon on the Mount is crafted around “righteousness”. “Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees”(Matthew 5:20) . “Beware of practicing your righteousness before others to be seen by them”. (Matthew 6:1) “seek first the kingdom and righteousness of God” (Matthew 6:33) “Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness” (Matthew 5:10)

So what does it mean? “Righteous” What are we dealing with here?

Old Testament scholar Gerard Von Rad has, in my mind, done the best work in helping us understand the word. In his “Old Testament Theology”, he writes “There is absolutely no concept in the [Bible] with so central a significance for all relationships of human life as that of righteousness. It is the standard not only for our relationships to God, but also for our relationships to our fellow humans, reaching right down to the most petty wranglings – indeed it is even the standard of our relationship to the animals and to our natural environment (Vol I, 370).

Did you hear in that paragraph the repetition of the word “relationship”? That is because relationship is what “righteousness” is all about. Dr. Von Rad argues that “righteousness” is not about living up to legal principles and standards. Rather

“righteousness” is all about living in faithfulness to the term of relationship. “righteousness” is about living up to the particular claims any given relationship lays upon us (Ibid, 372).

A spouse is “righteous” who lives up to the terms of the marriage covenant. A citizen is “righteous” who lives up to the expectation of the civil order.

“Righteous”, therefore simply means “right-relationship”, or “right-relatedness”. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for right-relationships, for right-relatedness.” The term “righteousness” is found everywhere – the Biblical Story because the Biblical Story is all about right-relationship!

It is in this light that we are to understand God’s gift of the Ten commandments. The apostle Paul, the apostle of grace, calls God’s commandments “the law of righteousness” (Romans 9:31) for the commandments are all about relationship. The Ten Commandments are not some arbitrary code of ethics God imposes on us. No, the Ten commandments are an exposition of the right-relatedness which flows from a right-relationship with the Living God.

What is the first line of the Law? Most people answer “You shall have no other gods before me.” But that is not the first line. The First line is “I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of bondage.” (Exodus 20:2) The Law begins with a declaration of relationship: “I am your God.” It is the language of Covenant God is saying, “before you hear anything else from Me hear that I have already established a relationship with you. I am your God, you are My people.” In the Ten Commandments, which follow the first lines of the Law, God is simply unfolding the nature of the divinely initiated right-relatedness. It is as though God is saying: “Look, I am your God and you are My people. Now that that is settled here is what our right-relatedness is going to look like, You will have no gods between us. No-one or nothing will take the place I have in your life. You will live by a new rhythm of time, by My sabbatical rhythm, six days of work, one day of rest. You will honour father and mother. You will not commit adultery. You will not covet.” The Law is not a list of “do’s and don’t’s” which we must obey in order to enter into relationship with God. The Law is simply a picture of the right-relatedness brought into being by God’s grace.

You can see then that disobedience is so grievous not because a code of ethics has been violated. Disobedience is so grievous because a relationship has not been taken seriously.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for right-relationship, for they and only they shall be satisfied.”

Now many scholars argue that the theological centre of the Sermon on the mount – which the Beatitudes introduce – is Matthew , chapter 5, verse 20. Jesus says “for I say to you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees you will not enter the Kingdom of heaven.” Yikes! Surpasses? My righteousness must surpass the

righteousness of the teachers of the Law and those who thought of themselves as spiritual agents? Surpass? How in heaven's name are those grabbed by the Gospel to live a "surpassing righteousness"?

By realizing that the Scribes and the Pharisees had missed the point. They thought of righteousness in terms of external conformity to the letter of the Law. But as Jesus shows us, one can obey the letter of the Law and not at all be faithful to the relationship being protected by the Law (5: 21-48)

Thus a woman could say to herself, "I am righteous towards my neighbour as long as I do not cause his blood to flow", ignoring the issues of anger and words of insult, which also damages relationships. A man could say to himself, "I am righteousness towards= that woman is long as I do not sleep with her", ignoring the issue of lustful fantasies whereby he is using for his own ends, which also damages relationship.

For Jesus, the righteousness of the Kingdom goes beyond legality. Just because an action is "legal" does not make it "righteous". Just because an attitude is "culturally acceptable" does not make it "righteous", For "righteous" means being faithful to relationship. Which means dealing with others on a more fundamental levels of honesty and justice and mercy and servanthood. And it is to those more basic levels that Jesus calls us.

Once more: "righteousness" is all about relational integrity and wholeness. A relational and wholeness that encompasses the totality of life. "Blessed are those who crave relational wholeness."

Scripture teaches us that we were created for four basic relationships: relationships constitutive of or existence in the image of God. These four relationships are most clearly laid before us in the opening chapters of the Bible, in Genesis 1-12.

First, we were made for a relationship with the earth (2:7). We are physical, material, ecological creatures. The Hebrew word for human is "adam". The Hebrew word for earth is "adamah". Our welfare is tied up with our welfare of the earth.

Second, we were made for a relationship with other human beings (2:18,22). We are social creatures. None of us is whole in isolation; we were created for community. The Hebrew word for man is "ish". The Hebrew word for woman is "ishah". We were made for fellowship with others.

Third, we were made for a relationship with the self (2:25). We are psychological creatures. Originally made to embrace ourselves as beloved without any guilt or shame.

And fourth, and most fundamentally, we were made for a relationship with the Living God. The relationship which holds all the other relationships together. We are spiritual creatures.

We were made for a "wholistic relationship".

- 1) A right-relationship with the created environment;
 - 2) A right-relatedness with other human;
 - 3) A right relatedness with our inner selves;
 - 4) And a right-relatedness with the Holy one;
- Trusting, obeying, enjoying, loving, experiencing Gods own delight in being God to us.

Now, we cannot read the Biblical Story without catching God's own hunger and thirst. God's hunger and thirst for this complete right-relatedness.

Which means we cannot read the whole story without encountering grief. God's grief. For the created order is now marked by so much un-righteousness: alienation, estrangement, manipulation, fear, hatred, violence and death. All because we have turned our backs on the relationship with the creator causing all the other relationships to unravel.

"Blessed, blessed, blessed are those who , like God, hunger and thirst for a full-ordered righteousness.

Jesus uses very intense verbs to describe this craving. William Barclay observes: "The hunger which (the fourth) Beatitude describes is no genteel hunger which could be satisfied with a mid-morning snack; is no thirst which could be slaked with a cup of coffee or an iced drink. It is the hunger of the person who is starving for food; and the thirst of the person who will die unless they drink." (Matthew , Vol 1, 99-100)

Jesus is not blessing those who are "mildly dissatisfied" with themselves and the world. He is blessing those who, as my friend Dale Bruner puts it, "cannot live unless they find righteousness". (the Christbook, 142)

"Blessed is the person who longs for righteousness as though his or her life depended on it." (Don McCullough, Happiness is Found in the Most Unlikely Place, 79)

Why this intensity? Why does this massive craving emerge in the souls of those grabbed by Jesus and His Gospel?

Because the Gospel is all about righteousness! The Kingdom of God that is breaking into the world in Jesus is all about right-relatedness. the Gospel is the good news that the Righteous God the God of all right-relationship has not given up! The Creator's intense passion that all of creation enjoy right-relatedness will not be t?????. In Jesus, God enters our un-righteous world and begins to re-construct our four-fold relational existence.

The apostle Paul tells the believers living in Rome, the "most loveable city" of the 1st century! "I am not ashamed of the Gospel (Romans 1:16) "why?" we ask; "why does the Gospel have the power to make us whole?" "Because" , Paul answers, "in the Gospel the righteousness of God breaks through". The Gospel of God is all about

God's "righteous-ing" all our unchecked relationships. In Jesus God is repairing all our relationship: with god, with the self, with other humans, with the earth. And the resurrection of Jesus is God's guarantee that God is going to see the job through to completion.

And that is why Jesus blesses those who crave righteousness: they are craving what the Living god craves. Congratulations! You lucky bums! You are alive with the Divine appetite! You are alive in the Passion of God Himself! Blessed! In synch are those who crave right-relationship with the earth. In synch are those who crave right-relationship with others who seek reconciliation between individuals, groups, nations as though their lives depended on it. Who starve for authentic community where people relate beyond their mass. Who starve for justice in law courts, integrity in business, fidelity in marriage.

"they shall be satisfied", says Jesus. Only they shall be satisfied. No other satisfaction is promised.

When? Satisfied when? On that day when the Kingdom of God breaks through all the way. On that Day when the re-construction job is finally completed. But because Jesus has already come and is present because the Kingdom is already near, our hunger and thirst can be met to a large degree even today. Why? Because everyday Jesus offers us Himself. Everyday Jesus offers us Himself as the source and embodiment of all right-related-ness. As He said to a very thirsty woman by a well in Samaria, so He says to us "Ask of Me and I will give you living water" (John 4:10) As he said to those who had their fill of religion but were bone dry, so He says to us "if you are thirst, come to Me and drink and out of your innermost being will flow rivers of living water." (John 7:37-38)

We cannot come just once. For when we come He awakens even deeper longings for even more of Him. The bread of life satisfies and yet any taste makes us hunger for more! Right? The living water quenches and yet every sip makes up thirst for more! Right? Take heart! So George McDonald once said: "in things spiritual, increasing desire is the sign that satisfaction is drawing near." (Life Essentials, 60)

Or, as philosopher Peter Kneeft puts it: "Dissatisfaction is the second best thing there is, because it dissolves the glue that entraps us to false satisfaction, and drives us to God, the only true satisfaction." (For Heaven's Sake, 160)

Do you see where we have come? It turns out that the hunger and thirst for righteousness is hunger and thirst for Righteousness Himself! Saint Augustine was right: "All our longings are, in the final analysis, longings for God".

So much so, G.K. Chesterton can say: "Every man knocking at the door of a brothel is looking for God." He may not realize it but his looking for a woman is symptomatic of his looking for God.

“Blessed are those who are going to die unless they find God.”

The British Poet Rudyard Kipling, best known for his work “Jungle Book” (1894) youngest recipient of the Nobel prize for Literature, was gravely ill. As he stirred in his hospital bed, a nurse came near and asked “what do you want?” Kipling answered “I want God.” I do not know how the nurse responded. But I she had even heard the Beatitudes, she would have said “Blessed you will be satisfied”.