

This morning we continue our study of the Beatitudes as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew. During Lent this year, we are studying one or two of the Beatitudes each Sunday as we ask ourselves: "Who is Jesus Christ to me? What is my relationship to Him? What must I do to grow closer to Him?" So far we have discussed the first three beatitudes: blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven; blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted; and blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Listen again to these words of Jesus in the fifth chapter of Matthew, the first twelve verses.

Read Matthew 5:1-12

Now let's look at the next beatitude in verse 6: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." The *Message* paraphrases it this way: "You are blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God. He's food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat." Now this would be a great beatitude to discuss if we were having a potluck after worship this morning. I really look forward to the day when we all will be able to gather again around the dinner table for some great food and fellowship.

Did you hear about the tragedy at the Baptist Church in Langley, South Carolina, when every covered dish at the church's monthly potluck was a green bean casserole? Stunned onlookers watched in horror as family after family arrived with the same popular dish in tow. By the time grace was said over the meal, there were over 25 green bean casseroles lining the buffet table with no meat dishes or desserts in sight. A few brave church members weathered the green bean avalanche by using large amounts of sweet tea to wash it down; while others, dazed and hungry, fled to the local MacDonald's for a happy meal. Repercussions from the church disaster were felt throughout the small community as local grocery stores reported a shortage of Campbell's Cream of Mushroom Soup and French's French Fried Onions.

Now words do not exist in a vacuum; they exist against the background in which they are spoken and written. This is particularly true for this beatitude. These words of Jesus had a different meaning and impact on the disciples and others who heard them for the first time than those of us reading them this morning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The fact is that very few of us know what it is really like to be hungry or thirsty today. And from the look of some of us, we have not missed many meals! However, in the ancient world it was very different. A working man's daily wages could just barely feed his family. In Palestine they ate meat only once a week and they were never far from real hunger or actual starvation.

Have you ever been so thirsty that your throat was so dry that it hurt? We live in an area where water is a precious commodity. Having lived in New Mexico for over 30 years, I have a greater appreciation for water now than when I grew up in South Carolina where we received over 70

inches of rain per year, and there were fish ponds and lakes everywhere you looked. Here Jesus is talking to people who didn't have the luxury of turning on a faucet with an endless flow of water. Back then, you had to walk to the village well and bring the water back to your home in a bucket. And if you were traveling, you hoped that you knew where the next water hole was and that you didn't get stuck in a sand storm.

Now the hunger described in this beatitude is not a hunger pain that can be satisfied with a mid-morning snack. For many of us hunger is having to wait five minutes at McDonalds for a Big Mac and a milkshake. And the thirst is not something that you can quench with a cup of coffee or a bottle of cold Mountain Dew. It is the hunger of a person who is starving for food and dying for a drink of water. So this beatitude asks: "how much do you want to know God better? Do you want it as much as a starving man wants food, or as much as a man dying of thirst wants water? How intense is your desire to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ?" Great questions to consider as we journey through Lent.

Psalm 84 states: "My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God." What does it mean to "long" for something? It means striving for something that you do not have, but want badly. Have you ever been under water for a period of time that is longer than you had expected? You know; as the time ticks away, how desperate you become to reach the surface and breathe fresh air. The greater the time that you are under water, the more you long for a breath of air until that desire overwhelms you, and you rush to get to the surface as rapidly as possible. You have no other thoughts but to quench your need for air.

That's what it means to "long for God." In the context of this beatitude, this is what it means to "hunger and thirst" after righteousness with the same desire that leads us to quench our physical need for food and water. In this beatitude, Jesus is saying that God wants us to long for Him because it is in that longing that our lives are really blessed. Think about it, just as there is a natural desire to satisfy our physical needs of hunger and thirst so is there a spiritual desire to satisfy our longing for God. God wants us to give Him our best; to desire to grow closer to Him each day. Unfortunately, many of us are content to give God only a brief moment of our time, a hasty prayer before a meal, a few dollars in the offering plate on Sunday, and forget about Him for the rest of the time.

But we were created in the image of God, and because of that very fact we can never be satisfied and at peace until we come back to God, come back to a loving relationship; the way it was meant to be from the beginning. Let's face it; there is a void in our lives that only God can fill. However, instead of seeking God, we try to fill this emptiness with all kinds of worldly things such as drinks, drugs, sex, material possessions, wealth, entertainment, the latest technical toys, the list can go on, but these are just fleeting attempts and always in vain. Our

search can best be described by the old country western song “Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places.” But Isaiah 55:2 states: “Why do you waste your time and money seeking that which does not satisfy or lasts; come to the water, the living water.” The point is that no matter what we chase after, only a right relationship with God can satisfy that need deep down in our soul.

A great illustration of this is the story of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11-32. The youngest son asked his father for his share of the inheritance, then left home and headed for a far country where he squandered all his money on wild living, on things that do not satisfy. He was far too easily pleased and fooled into thinking that this was what life was all about, only to fall short. When he had a lot of money, he had lots of friends and parties, but when the money was gone, so were his friends. At this point things started going downhill; he wound up living with the pigs and was so hungry that he even considered eating their slop. When he hit rock bottom, we are told that he came to his senses, and realized that in his father’s house all the servants had more than enough to eat and were well cared for. It was only in returning to his father that he would find real happiness and purpose in life. The same is true for us; it is only in putting God first and longing for a relationship with Him that we will truly be blessed.

As parents, we often warn our children and grandchildren to not eat candy before dinner time; if they do; they will lose their appetite for a nourishing meal. In the same way, Isaiah’s words warn us to stay away from things that are “not real food.” In today’s world, we find ourselves surrounded by empty treats like Reese Pieces and M and M’s that look inviting and entice us to temporary fulfillment. During these days of Lent, let’s strive to eliminate the “candy” in our lives, those things that are “not real bread” and do not satisfy, and keep us from hungering and thirsting for God.

The next beatitude is found in verse 7: “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.” The *Message* paraphrases this verse as follows: “You’re blessed when you care. At that moment of ‘care-full,’ you will find yourselves cared for.” Did you hear about the politician who, after receiving the proofs of his portrait, was very angry with the photographer? He stormed into the photographer’s shop and yelled: “This picture does not do me justice!” To which the photographer replied: “Sir, with a face like yours, you don’t need justice, you need mercy!”

Throughout the New Testament there is an understanding that to be forgiven we must be forgiving. This concept is at the heart of the Lord’s Prayer that we recite every Sunday morning; “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespassed against us.” Jesus gives us this beautiful prayer in the Sermon on the Mount as recorded in Matthew 6. In verses 14 and 15, Jesus emphasizes the need for forgiveness when He states: “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But **(here’s the kicker)** if you do not

forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” Ouch! It is a consistent teaching of the New Testament that only the merciful shall receive mercy.

When Robert Louis Stevenson lived in the South Sea Islands, each morning he led his family in worship which always ended with the Lord’s Prayer. One morning in the middle of the Lord’s Prayer, he rose from his knees and left the room. Knowing that his health was poor, his wife followed him and asked if anything was wrong. Stevenson replied: “I am not fit to pray the Lord’s Prayer today.” No one is fit to pray the Lord’s Prayer so long as there is an unforgiving spirit in their heart. If we are to be right with God, we must be right with others.

In addition to being forgiving, there is another way to look at this beatitude. The Greek word used here for being merciful means more than being sorry for or sympathizing with the other person; it means the ability to get right inside the other person’s skin until we see things through their eyes, understand what’s going on in their mind, and share the same feelings. It’s experiencing things together with the other person, literally going through what they are facing, walking in their shoes.

There is one principle in life that we often forget; that is, there is always a reason why a person thinks and acts the way they do, and if we knew that reason, it would be much easier to understand, to sympathize, and to forgive them. A person may act differently than we do because of past experiences in their life or the culture that they were raised in. One of the joys of our college ministry when we were in Socorro was getting to know students from all over the world and the ways we do things differently. A French proverb states: “To know all is to forgive all.” But we will never know all until we make an honest effort to get inside the other person’s mind and heart.

Now many people will not even try to do this; they are self-centered and are more concerned about their own feelings and life than being concerned about what others are experiencing. Have you ever tried to share a personal problem with someone and before you can even finish your statement, they interrupt you and start telling you about their problem? Jesus tells us to love others as ourselves; to put the needs of others before ours. Another way to state this beatitude is: “Blessed are those who show agape love, for they will be loved in return.” Remember agape love is always seeking the best for the other person no matter what they may have done to or said about you. We must always be willing to seek the best for others. Now just think how much better our world would be today if everybody practiced this in their daily lives.

We must also never forget that God showed us mercy first when He sent His Son Jesus Christ to become one of us. Jesus put on our skin so that He could better understand us. Because He

has faced the same temptations and demands of life that we have Jesus can sympathize with us and help us deal with whatever we are facing today.

In closing, as we study these words from Isaiah and Jesus, the question for each of us this morning is – are we wasting our time and resources on things that do not last; that do not satisfy that longing deep down inside each of us? What are we hungering and thirsting after? Where is our heart? Are we truly satisfied with our life right now or do we need to hunger and thirst after God? Does our relationship with the Lord need improvement? Do we see others through the eyes of Jesus? May our hunger and thirst for the Lord be demonstrated through love and mercy to those around us. Amen