

# Meeting With Christ

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Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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## BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO HUNGER AND THIRST FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS

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### Matthew 5:6

The fourth Beatitude taught by our Lord Jesus in the gospel of Matthew reads like this.

*Matthew 5:6. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.*

### Spiritual food

What does this statement mean? We generally regard anyone who hungers and thirsts as not very fortunate. But here, the Lord Jesus says that they are the blessed ones.

In this Beatitude, Jesus compares righteousness to food. You hunger and thirst for food. And of course, food is essential to our physical life. You hunger and thirst for that which you perceive, like food, to be essential to your life. Without food and drink, we die. So when our body hungers and thirsts, it is actually crying out in what is described as thirst for drink and hunger for food because the life of our body depends on it.

And Jesus is saying this: righteousness is as vital to the spiritual life as food and drink is to the physical life. That is the first point. Righteousness is something so vital to your spiritual life that your spirit, if it knew what it needed, would be crying out, hungering for righteousness. Because without righteousness, you cannot live spiritually. So the comparison is between food and drink that we need at the physical level to righteousness, which is both food and drink, at the spiritual level.

### Spiritual digestion

Now, what happens when you take food? What happens when you take drink? Do you just put the food on the plate? Or do you just pour the water in a cup? Obviously, that's not enough. It has to go into your stomach. It has to be internalized. The food that you have, it has to be internalized, i.e. digested, before that food is going to do anything to you. So the Lord Jesus is saying this: you must not only desire this righteousness, but you must take this righteousness and internalize it.

When you feed on this righteousness, it means that you absorb this righteousness in such a way that it becomes part of you. Righteousness must be absorbed into your being in the same way than the food that you eat is absorbed into your body. It becomes part of you. When you eat, the food is broken down by your digestive system into different biochemical molecules: proteins, carbohydrates, fat. These molecules will nourish every part of your body. The piece of food ceases to be a piece of food and becomes part of you.

At the spiritual level, we have to do the same thing with righteousness. We don't just take righteousness and put it in the pantry. This is not going to do anything to you. Righteousness has to be absorbed and internalized so that it goes to every part of your being, every part of your life. That is what the Lord Jesus says in John 6. When you receive Jesus in your heart, it must be done in such a way that you internalize Him. So Jesus says in John 6:57, *...he who eats Me, he also shall live because of Me.* It is not just receiving Jesus. It is not just putting the food on the plate. You have to absorb it. You have to internalize Christ. You must have Christ in every part of you being.

This righteousness, not only does it have to be absorbed, but it has to be expressed in doing good. So righteousness is both internalized and externalized. It is to be righteous and to do righteousness. There must be an inward righteousness and an outward righteousness. The righteousness that is absorbed must manifest itself outside for the world to see. Your life becomes a light in this world. We are the light of the world because we have the light of Christ in us. This light is not just a reflection. This light of Christ comes from within us and shines out. It comes from the heart, from our innermost being and it is externalized so that people can see it. It is in that sense that we should understand Jesus' words in John 7 when He says, *If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, **out of his heart will flow rivers of living water*** (John 7:37-38).

### **Having a starving spirit**

All this talk about internalizing righteousness would be useless if right at the start, there is a problem of appetite. If you don't have the desire to eat food, it is no use talking about digestion. Do you have an appetite for righteousness? Do you hunger for righteousness? A sick person has no appetite. If you have no appetite for righteousness, it might be that you are spiritually sick. Righteousness holds no attraction to those who have a lack of spiritual appetite. And therefore, you need to be healed. You need to be restored again to life and health.

It is the starving spirit that craves for righteousness, not the person who has a full stomach. This leads me to talk about fasting. Fasting, or controlled starvation, is one way for working up an appetite. Now, how do you fast spiritually? How can our soul fast?

Let's look at Isaiah 58. This chapter is about the religious activity of fasting. And here, Isaiah is dealing with the contrast of externalized fasting and internalized fasting. Let's start with v. 3

*Isaiah 58:3a. 'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and You have not seen? Why have we afflicted our souls, and You take no notice?'*

Here the Jews are complaining. 'We have been fasting and You, God, did not see it. Where have you been looking? We have humbled ourselves and You took no knowledge of it? How come?' And here is God's reply.

*Isaiah 58:3b. In fact, in the day of your fast you find pleasure, and exploit all your laborers. 4 Indeed you fast for strife and debate, and to strike with the fist of wickedness. You will not fast as you do this day, to make your voice heard on high.*

'When you were fasting,' the Lord said, 'you got ill tempered and irritable. You were fighting. You were punching each other. What kind of fasting is this?'

*Isaiah 58:5. Is it a fast that I have chosen, a day for a man to afflict his soul? Is it to bow down his head like a bulrush, and to spread out sackcloth and ashes? Would you call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the Lord?*

You see, the Jews have externalized their religion. They were more concerned about rituals than about obedience to God. The Lord could not accept their kind of fasting. Now, what is the kind of fasting that is acceptable to God? Here is the answer.

*Isaiah 58:6. Is this not the fast that I have chosen: To loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and that you break every yoke?*

*7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out; when you see the naked, that you cover him, and not hide yourself from your own flesh?*

Here we are told what fasting means in God's mind. In this passage, fasting means repentance from sin. It is turning away from wickedness. It is breaking the bounds of unrighteousness. Once you start doing that, you will experience the spiritual hunger that Jesus talks about. But so long as you keep sin and unrighteousness in your heart, you are not going to have any appetite for righteousness.

*Isaiah 58:8. Then your light shall break forth like the morning, your healing shall spring forth speedily, and your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. 9a Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry, and He will say, 'Here I am.'*

Spiritual fasting leads you to internalize righteousness. Then, when you call, God answers. Your healing will spring up. Your righteousness shall go before you. Your light shall shine through your outward acts of mercy and justice, when you share your bread with the hungry, when you cover the naked, when you care for the poor. And the source of your light is the glory of the Lord. Did you notice that this passage is very close to the Lord's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. *Let your light so shine before men, that they might see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven* (Matthew 5:16). How will that light come about to shine before men? It is through this hungering and thirsting for righteousness.

So you break with sin and you hunger for righteousness. Then you start feeding upon righteousness. And when you feed upon righteousness, this righteousness goes to every part of your being. And you are well satisfied. Righteousness, once you feed upon it, is like food. It gives you spiritual vitality. It gives you spiritual drive, spiritual energy.

This righteousness comes from God. It is not a righteousness that you earn. It is given to you and you internalize it. Then it inspires you. That is the point of Philippians 2:13. *For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.* It is God who inspires you, who is at work within you to will and to do. That righteousness of God completely energizes your whole being. That's what we mean by internalizing righteousness.

## **Intense appetite**

Now, notice this. Hunger and thirst express what? Intensity. When a person is hungry and thirsty, he will sacrifice a lot to get what he needs. He is ready to walk a long distance to get food and drink. He has no other choice. And once he gets it, he is energized. He is satisfied. *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst..., for they shall be satisfied.*

Do you feel this sense of intensity, of inner zeal? Is the Spirit within you causing you to glow? A person who hungers and thirsts for righteousness is someone who shows enthusiasm, intensity, dynamism, zeal. We are not talking about the external running around of activities. We are talking about this deep inner fire, the fire of God that glows in the heart of a person and which is expressed by this hungering and thirsting for righteousness. It is this kind of Christian that Paul has in mind in Romans 12:11 when he says, *Never flag in zeal, be aglow with the Spirit, serve the Lord.*

This hungering and thirsting is not a 'once and for all' kind of desire. It is a continual, an on going hungering and thirsting. In the Greek, we have a present continuous tense. It has to do with a

continual eating. And what is more, it is not just eating bits and pieces of righteousness. It is hungering and thirsting for the whole thing. Again, this is clear when we look at the verb in the original text. If Jesus wanted to talk about eating pieces of righteousness, i.e. just enough to make a person comfortable, He would have used a genitive case. But that's not what we find. The Lord Jesus uses an accusative case. It means that you hunger for all righteousness, and not just little bits of it. Therefore, you don't just obey certain biblical commandments. Your whole life must be in conformity with all of God's will.

So Jesus is talking about a continual hungering and thirsting for all righteousness. Is this desire ever satisfied? Yes, it is satisfied. But it comes back again, with a new hunger and a new thirst. You taste it and you see that God is good. And therefore, you want more. Your appetite is coming back again. It is satisfied, and yet you want more. This hungering and thirsting becomes a permanent feature of the Christian. In that sense, Paul was never completely satisfied. Forgetting the things which are behind him, he says in Philippians 3:14, *I press toward the goal...* 'I forget the things that are behind me and I go on. I press toward the mark in order that I may gain Christ.' Do you see the continual hunger of Paul for righteousness?

## **Finding righteousness**

Our study of the fourth Beatitude would not be complete if we don't mention where we can find this righteousness of God. Where are you supposed to go to find it? Well, where can you find it but in God Himself? This righteousness cannot be found anywhere else. It is the Lord who is our righteousness. Take for example Jeremiah 23:6 and 33:16. These passages tell us clearly that *The Lord is our righteousness*. Righteousness is from the Lord. He who hungers and thirsts for righteousness will find righteousness in God. That's the reason why the person who hungers and thirsts for righteousness is a person who hungers and thirsts for God. Psalm 42:1-2 says it in this way: *As the deer pants for the water brooks, so pants my soul for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?*

In the NT, we find the same thing too. Look at John 17:25. As Jesus was praying to the Father, He says, *O righteous Father!* Where is righteousness? It is in the righteous Father. *The Lord is our righteousness*. A person who hungers and thirsts for righteousness is a person who hungers and thirsts for God because he knows that righteousness can only be found in God.

Again, in the NT, we find that Jesus is the righteous one. 1John 2:1 speaks of Jesus Christ as the righteous. If we hunger for God, how do we find God? The Lord Jesus tells us. *No one comes to the Father except through Me* (John 14:6). Remember Psalm 42. The psalmist hungered and thirsted for God. *When shall I come and appear before God?* 'When shall I see your face, O God? My soul thirsts and hungers for You! How will I find God?' The answer is that it is through Christ. No man comes to the Father except through Jesus Christ. Do you understand this? Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are those who hunger and thirst for Christ for Jesus is the righteous one.

Another thing that we see in the NT is this. He who hungers and thirsts for God hungers and thirsts for His kingdom because the kingdom of God is righteousness, as Paul tells us in Romans 14:17. So first, he hungers for God. Then he finds that he hungers for Christ. And now, he hungers and thirsts for God's kingdom. Remember the Lord's prayer. *Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven* (Matthew 6:10). You can't pray that prayer unless you hunger and thirst for God's kingdom. And you don't hunger and thirst for God's kingdom unless you hunger and thirst for righteousness because His kingdom is righteousness.

You can also see that he who hungers and thirsts for righteousness will also hunger and thirst for the righteous. And the righteous, both in the NT and the OT, refers to the saints of God. Just look at 1Peter 3:12, which is a quotation of the OT. *For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous...* Why should you go to church? Because you hunger and thirst for God's people, for the righteous. You want

to be in the company of the people of God. You love His people, with their qualities and with their faults.

Now, in the Bible, God's Word is called the word of righteousness (Hebrews 5:13). It is a book that teaches righteousness. Therefore, he who hungers and thirsts for righteousness hungers and thirsts for the Word of God. If you want to feed on righteousness, you will find it right here in the Scriptures. Healthy Christians have an enormous appetite for the Word of God. They find it so delicious that they never cease to read and meditate on the Word of God.

If you really hunger and thirst for the word of righteousness, you will love the truth above all things. Don't put your church, your denomination, your theology or your reputation above the truth of the Word of God. You cannot say that you hunger for righteousness if you don't love the truth. And a person who loves the truth checks and rechecks his doctrines and his beliefs in the light of God's Word. He never assumes that they are infallible. Don't say, 'I'm a Protestant. He is a Catholic. Everything that a Roman Catholic says is false. Therefore I will not listen to him.' This is not the right attitude. We must not be dogmatic and narrow. We hunger and thirst for the truth, no matter where that truth comes from. If it is true, I shall acknowledge it. If a Catholic can show me something that I did not understand, I will learn from him. Let me check it from the Word of God. And if it is true, I will accept it.

It is the same thing at the relational level. If you are being criticized and that there is truth in the criticism, listen to it. Don't love your reputation more than the truth. Don't reject criticism simply because it comes from an enemy or because it has not been conveyed to you in a respectful manner. If something is true, you pay attention to it. We must be people who love the truth unconditionally.

### **Growing up to spiritual maturity**

We have now a clear idea of what the Lord Jesus means by hungering and thirsting for righteousness. Where is that righteousness that you can hunger and thirst for? As we search the Scriptures, we realize that it is concretely God Himself, the Lord Jesus, the kingdom of God, the disciples of Christ, and the holy Word of God.

Let us bear this in mind. Blessed is the man who continually hungers and thirsts for all righteousness. For he shall be satisfied. That is a promise. I am well satisfied in Christ and yet, I continue to thirst and hunger for more until that day when I gain Christ. It is not a righteousness of my own but a righteousness that comes from Jesus. That is what feeds my soul. This feeding on righteousness allows me to grow spiritually until I become completely like Him. I grow up to the full stature of Christ, with righteousness touching every part of my being. It is not that I have already attained it, as Paul said, but I press forward. I am growing in that direction.

The whole course of the spiritual life is found in this fourth Beatitude. It starts with repentance all the way to spiritual maturity. And we understand that it has to do with a feeding on righteousness in which righteousness is internalized in such a way that it gives life to every part of our being.