

Series: “More Than Happiness”
(Part 3) “Those Who Hunger and Thirst For Righteousness”

Every year some research group will come out with the happiest places to live in the U.S.

For 2024, the top 10 according to *Wallet Hub*:

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| 1. Fremont, CA | 6. Honolulu, HI |
| 2. Overland Park, KS | 7. San Francisco, CA |
| 3. San Jose, CA | 8. Pearl City, HI |
| 4. Madison, WI | 9. Columbia, MD |
| 5. Irvine, CA | 10. Scottsdale, AZ |

A different group, *The Hill*, listed their top 10:

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| 1. Arlington, VA | 6. Boise City, ID |
| 2. Plano, TX | 7. Raleigh, NC |
| 3. Fremont, CA | 8. Chesapeake, VA |
| 4. San Jose, CA | 9. San Francisco, CA |
| 5. Seattle, WA | 10. Anchorage, AK |

An HMIS study had a different list of cities where people are the happiest, listing Chicago at #6 and Baltimore at #7.

So, if you want to find happiness, move to one of these cities!

Of course, did you notice a problem here. The lists are different! Why? Is it because of the biases of the researchers? Different criteria are used in determining what factors make for happiness?

I mean, do you really want to move to Chicago, or Baltimore, or Anchorage Alaska if you're seeking happiness? Baltimore and Chicago have some of the worst crime data in the country!

And cities in California? San Francisco. Yeah, maybe at one point. But from news reports I've seen, this city, and other cities in California like Los Angeles, have been ruined by rampant crime, homeless people all over the place, sky high prices for housing and gasoline! 5 million people have moved out of California in the last 4-5 years.

Illust. By the way, studies have been done on the happiest *countries* in the world. One report had the United States listed at #23. For the last 10 years *Finland* has been #1. *Iceland* is #3. (Want to move to Iceland?)

To sum it all up, who knows how accurate these studies are? And even if they are, do you think we're guaranteed happiness if we move to one of the “happy” cities?

But I know a place where we can find happiness, and even more than happiness: that is by practicing the Beatitudes of Jesus!

Jesus told us where to go to find happiness. But it isn't a city or town or geographical area, it's a place in the heart and inner life. In the Beatitudes, Jesus says the deeply happy are those who realize their spiritual poverty and mourn over their sins, and the sin and pain of the world, and those who are humble, gentle, tamed by God!

Today's beatitude is the 4th one: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled" (Matthew 5:6). Or, as the Greek has it: "O the blessedness of those who hunger and thirst for righteousness!"

Jesus is talking about being hungry, and being thirsty! Ever been really, really hungry? No, I don't mean you haven't eaten for 3 hours, and you're starting to get hungry, and say, "Man, I'm starved!" I once took part with a youth group in a weekend fast. No food for a day or so. This turned out to create a new level of hunger for me. I had a headache, felt weak and miserable. The first food we ate after the fast was Campbell's vegetable soup. Talk about being, "Mm, mm, good!" Campbell's vegetable soup never tasted so delicious!

Ever been really, really thirsty? I don't mean you're a little dry, you go to the sink or refrigerator and get some water, or maybe grab a soda or a glass of iced tea. When Jesus says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst", the words He uses are very strong words: hunger to the point of *starvation*, thirst to the point of *dehydration*.

It's hard for us to imagine that intensity! But for those who first heard Jesus speak this beatitude, they knew hunger and thirst to a degree most of us do not. In Palestine, the average person's wages were so low that many lived on the edge of starvation. If you didn't find work that day, you might not eat. Episodes of *The Chosen* portray very well how Jesus' followers had to deal with hunger and their food supply. Palestine is a hot, dry climate. You had desert sun and hot sand and driving wind. In Palestine you might be miles from a well or a spring. So, whether you got to quench your thirst might be a matter of life or death.

So, there's an almost violent tone to Jesus' words as He talks about a hunger and a thirst that overshadows everything else!

What do you hunger for or crave more than anything else? What do you want most from life? Some Jr. Hi campers were asked on an application form for camp to name the 2 things they wanted more than anything else. Some said friends...others happiness...others health... security...education...a family...money. I'm not sure their desires are that much different from most *adults*. Maybe the thing we want most is financial security, good health, for family members to get along, a better marriage. These things aren't bad in themselves, but Jesus identifies what we should hunger and thirst for most if we want to have a foretaste of the joy of God's kingdom.

Jesus says, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for - *righteousness*”. What is righteousness? In the Bible “righteousness” basically means *a right relationship with God. To be right with God.*

The Bible says in our natural human state, we are not righteous – not right with God! Romans 3:9-10 says, “We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. As it is written, ‘There is no one righteous, not even one.’” We all sin against our Creator. We all have a tendency to go our own way and try to run our own life without God. We all fail to keep God’s commandments. And this separates us from God. Isaiah 9:2 tells us, “But your iniquities have separated you from your God.”

It is Christ, Christ alone, who can bring us into a right relationship with our Creator. 1 Peter 3:18 says, “Christ also died for sins once for all, the *righteous* (that’s Jesus) for the *unrighteous* (that’s us), that He might bring us to God.” As a young boy, I started to go to church, and felt drawn to God. But it was only when I realized that my sins separated me from God, and I needed Christ to restore that lost relationship with my Creator, that I really understood the gospel, and was saved.

Ever since we humans became alienated from God because of sin, there’s been a hole in our soul that only God can fill! Andrei Bitov, a Russian novelist, grew up under an atheistic, Communist regime. But God got his attention one dreary day. He recalls, “In my twenty-seventh year, while riding the metro in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) I was overcome with a despair so great that life seemed to stop at once, preempting the future entirely, let alone any meaning. Suddenly, all by itself, a phrase appeared: Without God life makes no sense. Repeating it in astonishment, I rode the phrase up like a moving staircase, got out of the metro and walked into God’s light.”

Are you right with God? Do you hunger and thirst in the depths of your being to be near to God – to have a meaningful relationship with God? A young man, very much in love, knelt before a beautiful young woman. “Sweetheart, I want you to know that I love you, and *more than anything else* I want you to marry me. I’m not a wealthy man. I don’t have a yacht, a Rolls-Royce or lots of money like Johnny Green, but I do love you with all my heart.” The young woman paused for a moment, then replied, “Honey, I love you with all my heart too. But before I say ‘yes’ to lifelong relationship, tell me a little more about Johnny Green.”

A lot of us may stall in committing ourselves wholeheartedly to God and Christ because of the “Johnny Greens” in life – the attractions and distractions that keep us from the full pursuit of God in our life. It’s when our hunger for God and the desire for a relationship with Him fully captures us that we know the blessedness of a relationship with our Maker! Jesus says, “O the blessedness of those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled!” (Matthew 5:6).

But in the Bible, “righteousness” is not only a right relationship with God. It also involves *right living*. If I’m really right with God, I’m going to be living right! For Hebrews, righteousness and living right wasn’t just being decent and moral. It meant *doing God’s will*.

When I hunger and thirst for righteousness, I'm going to have an insatiable desire to do what pleases God, to do His will. The structure of the Greek sentence in this beatitude is very unusual. Usually, the expression is to hunger for *some* bread (not the whole loaf), or to thirst for *some* water (not the whole jug). Here, the expression is to hunger and thirst for the *whole of righteousness. All of it!*

It's easy to be satisfied being "partly righteous"! Here's a person who's honest in every facet of life, able to maintain sexual purity - but this same person doesn't have much patience for people struggling with bad habits, or isn't very understanding towards anyone who has slipped morally. On the other hand, another person may drink a bit too much, swear at times, but this person is the most gracious, warm, forgiving person you'd ever want to meet! It's so much easier to pick and choose in what areas we want to live right, isn't it? To opt for a kind of "selective goodness", rather than trying to please God in every aspect of our life. But Jesus says, "O the blessedness of those who hunger and thirst *for all of God*, and who crave *to please God in all they do!* For these are the ones who will be *satisfied!*

Let's get back to question I asked earlier: *What do you want most out of life? What do you crave for the most?* Bruce Springsteen said it, "Everybody's got a hungry heart...". It's just that often we hunger for the things that don't satisfy *in the long run.*

A long time ago, the prophet Isaiah pointed to this issue. "Hear, everyone who thirsts; come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread and your earnings for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. (Isaiah 55:1-2).

God says through Isaiah: "Why are you seeking stuff that doesn't satisfy? A lot of people today crave money, or nice clothes, or a beautiful home, or new car or truck. Many long for education, a successful career, family, or to retire and enjoy a more leisurely life. These things are not bad in themselves, but will they satisfy us in the long run? Will they assuage the deepest longing of our human spirit? *Only God can satisfy our souls!*

Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they will be filled" (Matthew 5:6). Jesus wasn't the only one who pointed to the importance of this desire. The writer of Psalm 42 also did. "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God" (Psalm 42:1-2a). We see this also in the Scripture read for today: "O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water" (Psalm 63:1). Notice how God satisfied him: "My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips" (Psalm 63:5).

But it's in the coming of Jesus that our hunger and thirst for God can be most deeply filled. He said He is the Bread of Life, and if we eat that bread we will hunger no more. He said He is water to quench our thirsty souls. Words He spoke to the woman at the well in Samaria are

words for us: “Jesus said to her, ‘Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life’” (John 4:13-14).

John Dunne tells of early Spanish sailors who reached the continent of South America after an arduous voyage. The ships sailed into the headwaters of the Amazon River, an expanse of water so wide the sailors presumed it was still the Atlantic Ocean. It never occurred to them to drink the water, since they expected it to be salt water. As a result, some of these sailors died of thirst. Here were people dying of thirst as their ships floated on the world’s largest source of fresh water!

In a sense, this is a metaphor for our age. There are so many people starving and dehydrated in their spirit and soul, when God offers food and drink to more than fill us!

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (Matthew 5:6).

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