

BUILDING CHARACTER:
On Being One Who Hungers and Thirsts for Righteousness
A Study of Matthew 5:6

Characteristic of Completeness: Goodness/Integrity

Big Idea: True righteousness must be a gift before it can become a practice.

Related Scriptures: Psalm 5:12; Isaiah 64:6; Matthew 5:20; 6:33; 9:13; John 6:35; 15:5;

Romans 3:10; 9:30-10:3; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Galatians 3:1-3; Philippians 3:9; Hebrews 4:12

Introduction

1. What kind of person does God long to bless and empower? On what sort of man or woman is God eagerly waiting to pour out His favor? Who's the type to receive God's enthusiastic approval and authority?

Good people come to mind—good people who are righteous in their conduct. Good, moral, upright people. The ones full of righteousness and integrity. The wholesome ones who take a stand for what is right. Surely *they* are the ones God longs to bless. It's only fair. Right?

2. Apparently not according to Jesus. Curiously, Jesus does not warm up to righteous people. In fact, if you're a righteous person, Jesus says He didn't really come for you. In Matthew ► 9:13, He says,

^{NAU} Matthew 9:13 “. . . I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

Moreover, Jesus suggests that righteousness doesn't really do anybody any good in the end. He picks out the most righteous people of His day—the scribes and Pharisees, the religious folks whose righteousness was considered unsurpassable—and He explains exactly what their righteousness gets them: a ticket straight to hell. That's essentially what He's saying in Matthew ► 5:20:

^{NAU} Matthew 5:20 “For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses *that* of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.”

This was not intended to motivate more righteousness, but to abandon righteousness altogether as a means of getting to heaven, because it doesn't work; it's hopeless.

Moreover, Jesus says it's actually the ones who *lack* righteousness who will be blessed. The ones who will get God's approval are the ones who are, in fact, so empty of righteousness that they're starving for it. That's what Jesus says in ► Matthew 5:6, which is our text for today. Please turn to Matthew 5:6. There, Jesus says,

^{NAU} Matthew 5:6 “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.”

Hunger and thirst signal what you *lack*, not what you have. The ones who will be blessed *lack* righteousness. The ones who ain't got it and ain't got it bad—*they* will be satisfied.

3. This raises some questions, doesn't it? So, are we supposed to live like hell? Be as unrighteous as possible? Forget about morals? Party like pagans?

And what about the places in the Bible that commend righteousness? For example, ► Psalm 5:12 says to God,

^{NAU} Psalm 5:12 For it is You who blesses the righteous man, O LORD, You surround him with favor as with a shield.

Doesn't this flatly contradict what Jesus said? Doesn't this suggest that, when it comes to righteousness, *having* it brings God's blessing, not *lacking* it? What are we to make of this?

- I. In ► order to understand and apply what Jesus is saying in our text, we first need to understand what kind of righteousness Jesus is talking about.
 - A. I want to show you that there are at least two kinds of righteousness in the Bible: ours and His. Self-righteousness and God-righteousness. Our goodness and His goodness. Our integrity and His integrity. In fact, our ► Characteristic of Completeness for the week is Goodness and Integrity.
 1. Sometimes the Bible spells out which kind of goodness or righteousness is in view. Notice, for example, that in Matthew ► 5:20, the possessive pronoun, "your," tells us Jesus is talking about self-righteousness:

^{NAU} Matthew 5:20 "For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses *that* of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." [Emphasis mine]

Jesus' point is that we ought to give up on self-righteousness as a means of entering the kingdom of heaven. If it's not working for the scribes and Pharisees, it's not going to work for anybody.
 2. On the other hand, notice in ► Matthew 6:33, it is clear Jesus is referring to God-righteousness when He says,

^{NAU} Matthew 6:33 "But seek first . . . His righteousness . . ." [Emphasis mine.]

The possessive pronoun, "His," tips us off.

3. In other places where it's not spelled out—ours or His—we are left to infer from the context whose righteousness is in view. For example, when Jesus says in ► Matthew 9:13 . . .

^{NAU} Matthew 9:13 “. . . I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

. . . it is reasonably clear that He is referring to the self-righteous. The self-righteous see no need for Jesus, no need for a Savior because they've talked themselves into thinking they're not all that bad.

4. Both kinds of righteousness are in view—ours and His—in ► Romans 10:3, where we learn an important distinction between the two. Self-righteous people trust in their own goodness to get them through; in contrast, God-righteous people rely completely on God's goodness to get them through. The Apostle Paul is talking about self-righteous people who are trusting in their own goodness, when he says,

^{NAU} Romans 10:3 For not knowing about God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God.

Self-righteous people seek to “establish their own” goodness apart from God. They do not “subject themselves to,” or surrender themselves to, or rely on the righteousness of God.

5. But ► self-righteousness is self-deception. Self-righteousness is an oxymoron. Self-righteousness is a false righteousness because the Bible tells us we have no true righteousness of our own. Romans ► 3:10 says:

^{NAU} Romans 3:10 . . . “THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE”

Isaiah ► 64:6 says:

^{NAU} Isaiah 64:6 . . . all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment . . .

So we have these two kinds of righteousness: ours and His. Self-righteousness and God-righteousness. False righteousness and true righteousness.

- B. Well, ► which kind of righteousness is in view in our text? What kind of goodness? What kind of integrity? Let's look at the clues.

1. We have people ► “who *hunger* and *thirst* for righteousness.” Jesus’ use of this food-and-water metaphor is our first clue that the righteousness He’s talking about does not come from people. We depend on food and water, but they don’t originate with us; they’re provided externally, and we receive them, we take them in. So far, it doesn’t look like this is self-righteousness.
2. Also, our text says, ► “they shall be satisfied.” This is in the passive voice, indicating that the people aren’t the ones who are satisfying themselves; they are being satisfied by someone or something beyond themselves. Looks like it must be God.

And the Greek term for ► “satisfied” literally means to be filled with food.¹ What’s the food with which they are filled? The context demands that it’s the righteousness for which they hunger and thirst: God-righteousness, not self-righteousness. God will see to it that spiritual beggars who hunger and thirst for lack of God-righteousness will receive it. That’s how the spiritual beggars are blessed.

II. How ► does this work? What does this look like? Where does this show up in everyday life? I want to show how this relates to two aspects of life: First, how you become a Christian and, second, how you live as a Christian. In theological terms, it relates to justification and to sanctification. It relates to being adopted into God’s forever family at one point in time, and it relates to how you live within the family for the rest of your life. Let me show you.

- A. First let’s consider how you become a Christian. That is, how you are justified before God, how you are adopted into His forever family, how you get to heaven.

“Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness” can describe unbelievers—unbelievers who recognize that they lack the goodness required to be right with God. They lack true righteousness, true goodness. They are sinners in need of a Savior. They see that they must trust not in themselves for eternal salvation, but in Christ alone. And having trusted in Christ, they receive the righteousness of God as a gift. In that way, they become filled, satisfied believers.

This does not make believers good people; it merely gives them good standing before God. They are justified or counted as righteous, and in that way, they are filled.

The exchange is described in ► 2 Corinthians 5:21. It’s an exchange in which Jesus takes on our sin and bears the punishment for it, while we, in turn, receive His righteousness. It says,

¹ W. Bauer, F.W. Danker, W.F. Arndt, and F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3d ed., s.v. “χορτάζω,” (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), hereinafter abbreviated BDAG.

^{NAU} 2 Corinthians 5:21 He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

This exchange is activated by our faith, not our goodness. We do nothing to earn it. It has nothing to do with our righteousness, only His. We simply believe in Jesus to make things right, and His righteousness is credited to our account. In ► Philippians 3:9, Paul says that he wants to . . .

^{NAU} Philippians 3:9 . . . be found in Him [Christ], not having a righteousness of my own derived from *the* Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which *comes* from God on the basis of faith

Having received this God-righteousness by faith, we are forever forgiven, forever saved from the penalty of our sin, forever free from spiritual bankruptcy, forever adopted into God's family, forever satisfied. In ► John 6:35, Jesus says:

^{NAU} John 6:35 . . . "I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst."

So, I think our text does have something to say about how we become true Christians:

^{NAU} Matthew 5:6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied."

- B. But ► I suspect that's not the main message the text. I suspect the primary point relates to how we live as Christians. It's about sanctification. It's about how we live in God's family once we're already adopted.
1. You see, Matthew most commonly uses the word "righteousness" to describe a right way of living before God.² And the verbs for hungering and thirsting in our text are in the present tense, hinting that an ongoing spiritual process is in view, much like the physical satisfaction of our hunger and thirst is an ongoing, repeatable process. It's the process of growing up spiritually. It's the process of sanctification. It's the process of living out the righteousness of God.
 2. So God-righteousness comes to us not only as a one-time gift in the form of eternal life, it also comes to us day by day in the form of direction and power to live the Christian life. How do we access this kind of direction and power? The answer comes from Jesus in our text: We hunger and thirst for righteousness.

² For example, Matthew 1:19; 3:15; 5:10.

This is where “those who hunger and thirst for righteousness” describes believers—believers who recognize that they still lack the goodness required to live right apart from God. They still lack true righteousness, true goodness apart from God. They are still sinners who still need God for living. They see that they must still trust not in themselves for living right, but in Christ alone. And as they keep trusting in Christ, they receive more and more of God’s righteousness as a gift to be lived out.

And that brings us to the ► big idea of my sermon: True righteousness must be a gift before it can become a practice.³ That is, we can never be truly righteous on our own; we can only live out the righteousness we receive from God as a gift. Relying on our own self-righteousness is a false lure. It won’t fill us; it won’t satisfy; it’s junk food. True righteousness must be a gift before it can become a practice. Jesus ► tells His disciples:

^{NAU} John 15:5 “. . . apart from Me you can do nothing.”

2. I suspect most believers don’t get this. They struggle with it. I’m still trying to figure it out. Every true Christian has relied on God-righteousness for eternal life. But strangely, we often fall back on self-righteousness for Christian living. It’s as if we say, “Thanks God for the gift of eternal life; now, I’ll take it from here. You just watch. I’ll be real good.”

And we tell ourselves things like, “I really need to pray more.” Or, “I really need to read the Bible more.” Or, “I really need give more.” Or, “I really need to stop doing this or watching that.” Or, “I’m going to make everything better now.” And maybe we white-knuckle it for awhile, relying on our self-righteousness—our own goodness to pull it off. Because that’s what we’ve learned to do. That’s what our culture teaches us. Self-sufficiency. Self-reliance. Self-righteousness. And it might even seem to work, for a while. We might even look pretty good to others.

But the Christian life lived according to self-righteousness ultimately leads to more dysfunction—to things like moralism or legalism or bigotry or pride or The Crusades or witch trials or discouragement or burnout or just plain giving up on the whole Christian life because we don’t have the power to pull it off.

The Apostle Paul pulls us up short in ► Galatians 3:3. He says:

^{NLT} Galatians 3:3 How foolish can you be? After starting your Christian lives in the Spirit, why are you now trying to become perfect by your own human effort?

³ I’m borrowing this line from John Koessler, “Eat, Drink, and Be Hungry,” *Christianity Today*, September 4, 2007; available at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/august/18.35.html>; internet; accessed 4 September 2007.

In other words, after becoming a Christian by relying on God-righteousness, why are you now trying live the Christian life by relying on your self-righteousness? If self-righteousness had no power to save you then, why would you think it has the power to sustain you now? It doesn't work.

3. Well ► then, how do we rely on God-righteousness for living? We start by hungering and thirsting for it. That is, we acknowledge our own lack of righteousness apart from God. We forsake trying to do things our way, by our will, according to our goodness. Because apart from the gift of God-righteousness, we can do nothing—nothing truly righteous.

True righteousness must be a gift before it can become a practice.

4. I can't think of anyplace where this is more relevant or important than trying to apply the Bible to your life.
 - a. More often than perhaps we'd like to admit, applying the Bible to our lives can be an exercise in self-righteousness. I want come off good. So maybe I listen to a sermon. According to the preacher, the Bible says love your neighbor.⁴ And I say, "Okay by me. I can do righteous." So I start pouring myself out in loving service to everybody who will sit still long enough for me to serve them.

At first, it's great. I'm righteous! Surely the Lord is pleased with what I'm doing. Surely this is the life of goodness and integrity. I'm leaving a legacy, baby. My Life Group is going to be impressed.

And then it starts. I notice some ungratefulness in the people I'm trying to serve. I cook for them, and they don't show up on time. I give them my time, and they just want more. I give them counsel, and they don't listen. I give an extra effort, and nobody notices. And it's starting to chap my hide. And I'm getting tired. Really tired. Until one day, I give up. I'm done. I'm not going to love these SOB's (sons of Beelzebub).

And I think, "Well, what's the next biblical principle? Maybe the next one will go better." But it doesn't. And so, I call out to God: "God, I'm trying to do good, but You're not helping me here. I'm trying to do Your work, but I can't seem to follow through."

⁴ Matthew 22:39.

And He says, “Exactly. Apart from Me you can do nothing. When you give up working on your own righteousness, I’ll give you some of Mine. You’re not hungry yet.”

- b. Let’s rewind. Let’s go back to the biblical command to love your neighbor and see what it might look like to apply it by first hungering and thirsting for God-righteousness.

The Word of God as applied by the Holy Spirit does its work first and foremost on the inside, in the heart. Hebrews ► 4:12 tells us that the Bible is . . .

^{NAU} Hebrews 4:12 . . . able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

But we don’t often let it. Our propensity is to avoid the difficult, often painful heart work and skip right to the behavior we think would make us righteous. But skipping the heart work almost always leads to self-righteousness. Start with the heart.

Starting with the heart begins with prayerful openness to God, asking Him to examine our hearts, asking Him to show us what is and isn’t there, praying for what He may want to do in and through us.

“Lord, Your Word tells me to love my neighbor. I don’t know how exactly You want this truth to transform me. But I’m open. Search my heart. See if there is any hurtful way in me. Show me today what You’d like to do in me and through me. Who do You want me to love? How do You want me to love?”

And I wait. Maybe minutes. Maybe days or weeks. And in the waiting, maybe I begin to see that, in my heart of hearts—let’s be honest—I don’t really want to love people. Not unconditionally. I love when it’s easy. I love when it’s safe. I love when I want something. I love when it suits me. I love when it makes me look good. I love when there’s a clear payoff. And this is ugly.

Some people think I’m pretty loving, but my wife is onto my game. She notices I’m attentive when I want something. Before God and His command to truly love, I find myself naked, destitute and empty.

And I particularly don’t want to love people who aren’t all that lovable. “And, Lord, you keep bringing to mind that unlovable person. Surely You don’t expect me to . . . not *him*. Not after what he’s done. He’s

going to take advantage. Not him. I don't have it in me. You're asking me to do something I cannot do."

And the Lord says: "Hungry? That's good. Thirsty? Wonderful. Because I've been waiting to fill you with the gift of My righteousness. I want to bless and empower you. I want pour out my favor on you. I want to give you my enthusiastic approval and authority to move out. Now go. Love him. *We* can do this."

I go. I'm scared, but I go. Because I'm filled. Then, I see God's righteousness at work, not my own. I can take no credit for it; it's His. And I crave more.

You see, true righteousness must be a gift before it can become a practice.