

A VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

The Beatitudes

by Rev. A. T. Vergunst



Lecture 6

*Blessed Are They Which Do Hunger
and Thirst After Righteousness*



The John Knox Institute
of Higher Education

Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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The Beatitudes

10 Lectures

by Rev. A. T. Vergunst

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The Beatitudes

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Lecture #6

Blessed Are They Which Do Hunger and Thirst After Righteousness

Welcome, dear friends, to our sixth section in the study of the Beatitudes. May God's Spirit continue to lead us, as well as to comfort or convict us, as we're listening to Jesus' teaching in this portion of Scripture. Let me begin with a well-established fact that is illustrated throughout all world history, and that is that Christianity isn't the only religion in our world. With religion, it is about the same as with cars. There are many models of cars, and so there are also many different models in religion. Now back to cars, no matter what model car you have, no matter how simple or how fancy, it is true that every car is actually very similar to the other ones. They all have wheels and axles. They have a motor and steering wheel, and, as I speak, all, most of them at least, still need a person to drive it. Now so it is with religion. In religion, all worship a god, some higher being, all hold to certain standards or moral codes. Most of them are occupied with seeking an answer on the question that is asked in Job 9:2, "How should man be just with God?" Among all these religions, Christianity isn't only unique, it is unapologetically exclusive in its answer that the question, as well as the morals, are the only ones. Listen to Jesus as He speaks it in one sentence, "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by Me" (John 14:6). Now if you read that faithfully and carefully, He says there is no other way to approach God and to be reconciled with God than through Him. That's exclusive, unapologetically so. Jesus also taught that, no matter what you say or what you do or what you give, nothing matters more if it is not done in charity. He has incredibly high standard on this charity, as you can find in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3. Now charity is love, but it's a love that isn't based on the quality of the thing you love. Charity is the exercise of love as the result of a deliberate choice to love, even though the object you love is unworthy or unattractive. Although I would really desire to explore the matter of charity—this high moral quality of Christianity—I need to leave that; I need to focus on the question why Jesus claims exclusivity among all the varieties of religions. Why is He the only Name, the only Person "under Heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved," as Peter claimed about Jesus in Acts 4:12.

Now the answer to this question brings us to the fourth Beatitude in the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness." In the previous talk, I have drawn attention to the fact that Jesus' seven Beatitudes are carefully structured. You recall, hopefully, that I compared them to a person with a rib cage of six ribs, with a breastbone connecting in the middle—the fourth one, and then three on both sides. Let me add a different mental picture, and this is the picture of a fruit tree. The first three of the Beatitudes, compare those to the roots feeding into the trunk—poor, mourning, meek. The second set of the three are the fruit bearing branches

that come out of the trunk. That makes the fourth Beatitude a massive, solid tree trunk. That's the picture I would like you to have in mind as we look at this fourth one. Let me expand that, extend that picture of the tree a little. A sense of my spiritual poverty—the first Beatitude; the sense of my mourning over that sin—the second; and a sense of meekness, as I see God's majesty and justice, awakens in us a hunger and a thirst for deliverance, for a solution. That deliverance is provided in the word *righteousness*, and it is in the righteousness of Jesus. So then, the second set of the three Beatitudes (5, 6 and 7), are the fruit-bearing branches which grow out of the fourth one. As I see and as I taste the deliverance in the righteousness of Jesus, that will lead to the blossoming of a life of righteousness that is expressed in a devotional love to God and my neighbor. Jesus sketches these three aspects of devotion in being merciful, in being pure in heart, and in being a peacemaker.

So in examining this fourth vital sign of the spiritually regenerated soul, we will seek the answer on two basic questions we have asked in the previous Beatitudes. The questions are: [first], what is exactly meant with this hunger and thirst after righteousness? Secondly, then what is meant with this blessing that is attached to this hunger and to this thirst, for they shall be filled? So again, what is now the exact meaning of this hunger and thirst after righteousness that the Lord Jesus here pronounces? As we have seen before, Jesus didn't call you blessed simply because you were poor, or simply because you were sad, and here also, not simply because you are hungry or thirsty. Matter of fact, we're all in that condition already. We all long hungrily and thirsty for satisfaction. We hunger and thirst for an often lost and eluding happiness. We all long, no matter who you are, for a solid security in life and death. Every person longs for a fulfillment or satisfaction of the inner void that we carry within us. We desire to be like that infant who lays contentedly in the arms of his mother with a sense of peace. We long for that, we hunger for that. Yet to satisfy this hunger that is in all of us, most men religiously pursue something or someone to meet our inner need or to quench this raging thirst. In Isaiah 55:2, God addresses that humanness when He asked, "Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread?" It doesn't really feed you. Why do you "labor for that which satisfieth not? Now the ways we labor and we sweat in order to be satisfied, of course, differ greatly from one to another. Some people are pursuing that in material gain, but such gain will never hug you when you're lonely. It will not comfort you when you're in pain, all that material gain cannot buy you happiness, and it will not work to avoid death. Now others go a different direction to deal with this inner void. They labor hard to get rid of God idea. They like to live as if He doesn't exist, either because we can't figure Him out—it's too many contradictions, or we find it a useless mind game, or simply because God doesn't fit in our lifestyle. However, the majority of men get religious, and they force themselves into all kinds of religious exercises which are boring or often irksome or unexciting or even enslaving. Sadly, sometimes they even become cruel or violent, all with one purpose—to somehow find salvation, to somehow secure peace, somehow to escape maybe the fear of death and hell, or to somehow quiet the nagging conscience. We do all to secure the favor of God. In all these cases, it remains true—it's not real bread to feed us. All the labors, all the accomplishments, all the successes, all the acquisitions don't truly satisfy. There still remains an inner void or restlessness. Why is that? It's because none of those pursuits provide us what Jesus alone can provide us, and what we lost in our fall, and that's the word *righteousness* that He speaks about. So therefore, the blessedness Jesus speaks of is not just in being hungry or being thirsty—all of us have that—but the blessedness is in the *object* of this hunger and thirst—righteousness.

So then, what did Jesus mean with righteousness? The word righteousness is a key word in the Bible. It is mentioned over 280 times. The first time it's mentioned is Genesis chapter 15:6, in connection with Abraham. There we read, "And he (Abraham) believed in the LORD; and He counted it to him for righteousness." Another passage [where] we find this word *righteousness* is a Psalm of David—Psalm 31:1—where David prayed, "In Thee, O LORD, do I put my trust; let me never be ashamed: deliver me in Thy righteousness." He points away from himself. In Psalm

71:16, he did the same thing when he says, “I will make mention of Thy righteousness, even of Thine only,” not his own. So the Old Testament already speaks about this word *righteousness*, and that carries out into the New Testament, but what does this word really mean?

Righteousness. My favorite definition is a very simple one. It means to be right and to do right. First, to be right means I will be the right person within my heart. I have the right condition in my heart. To be right means that I find within myself thoughts, motives, desires, imaginations or abilities that would be right according to God’s standard. So besides be right, it’s do right. To do right means that I would do all the right things, so I use my words, so I do actions or reactions, again according to the standard of God’s law. To be right and to do right can therefore be summed up with one other key word which is very much similar, the word *obedience*. Think of the words *righteousness* and *obedience* as similar words. “Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness”—after obedience.

To put it in perspective and to illustrate what Jesus is teaching in this Beatitude, let me ask you what you would fill in, in the blank of this statement: As water is to clouds, as heat is to sun, so happiness is to what? The answer is *obedience*. Happiness is obedience, obedience to the law of devotional loving God and my neighbor. Once you see how happiness and obedience or righteousness are married, you understand the deepest reason of the deep unhappiness or dissatisfaction found in us humans. If you see this connection between happiness and obedience, you understand why Jesus calls them *blessed* who have learned to hunger and to thirst, not for money, goods, status, position, but for righteousness, for obedience. The word *satisfaction* is in connection to this. In most of our minds, the word satisfaction is defined as having enough. Interestingly, in the Latin root of that word, satisfaction does not mean having enough, it means doing enough, and this little tidbit of language study is a key to understanding the fourth Beatitude. Someone who is hungry and thirsty is not satisfied. When will he be satisfied? Not when he *has* enough, but when he *does* enough, when he does enough to answer the original purpose for which we were created—to glorify God, to love Him, to serve Him and to serve our fellow creatures in devotional love. That *doing enough* is to be right and to do right, that *doing enough* is righteousness and is the key to true happiness. To say it in another way, only when I live in perfect righteousness before God and with all my fellow creatures, will I again experience what Paradise was before sin broke it apart. Can you see now how deep-seated our problem is? Can you see that, since we are spiritually poor, we’re destitute or bankrupt in being right and doing right, that we are lost, that we are doomed to be in a life that will never, never satisfy. Why? Because we aren’t righteous. We can’t be righteous or, to say it simpler, I can’t be and I can’t do what is right in the eyes of God.

Now that brings us back to the fourth Beatitude. What does it mean that someone is hungry and thirsty for righteousness? It means obviously that this person doesn’t find righteousness within him or herself. You know you are hungry and thirsty when your stomach is empty. You can’t fill that with yourself—you need that outside of you. So the person that Jesus is here describing as the blessed person, is a person who is hungering and thirsting for righteousness he obviously doesn’t possess. He doesn’t find it in himself. He can’t produce it either. You cannot just fill your own stomach with yourself. Did this person try to be right and to do right in themselves first? Well, undoubtedly, we all do that at first. Once we discover that we are not what we are to be, and not do what we do, we try to polish ourselves up. We try to change, we try to make ourselves acceptable to God by our doing or by our undoing, by our thinking, by our inner being. Yet, as the Holy Spirit opens up your eyes, you learn what Scripture says elsewhere, that our best is still filthy in God’s sight (Isaiah 64:6). Why? because God looks deeper than the outside. He sees us fall short of the perfection that is in God, and that we once were able to love in perfection. That discovery [that] it all falls short of being perfect in righteousness creates this intense hunger and thirst.

So then secondly, why is this a blessing to experience this kind of hunger and thirst after righteousness? Now that question is even more urgent when we learn to see the meaning of the

original Greek for hunger and thirst. Jesus is here not describing a healthy, normal appetite or thirst. No, the hunger is painful hunger. The word thirst is parched thirst. Those are the words He describes here. Now, why would you call that condition blessed? Now again, as in before, this kind of hunger and thirst for righteousness is not a natural hunger. As in all Beatitudes, again this hunger and thirst for the righteousness is a fruit of the Spirit's saving work. Secondly, this hunger and thirst for righteousness, the Holy Spirit uses to lead us to Jesus Christ. Let's just for a moment ask the question, Who is Jesus Christ? I'll let you hear the answer from Jeremiah 23:6, where it says He is "THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS." That Scripture speaks prophetically about the Lord Jesus Christ as being the Lord *our* righteousness. As Jesus was born, He was sinless. As He lived His life—as you can see in the biographies of the Bible—He lived a sinless life. He was continually declared innocent. In other words, He was right, sinless—He did right. He is the Righteous One, the only One. In Him, God the Father provided a perfect Savior, exactly suitable to what we need. Friends, what God requires from us—to be right, to do right—He provided in Jesus our righteousness. To say it simply, in Jesus Christ, God provided us the *enough being* and *enough doing*. Jesus did enough in His life to provide the required obedience to live with God forever. Jesus did enough in His suffering and in His death to provide the required obedience that would pay the ransom price we owe God. As J. C. Ryle put it in one brilliant, short sentence, "Our salvation is in Jesus' doing and dying, and in both He did enough; and on basis of His righteousness, we can be reconciled to God and be received in God's eternal embrace, without Him ever lowering His standards of justice and holiness."

Now, can you see how this hunger and thirst after Jesus Christ is like the heartbeat of the new creature? Friends, it is good to have a sense of your spiritual poverty. It is good to be humbled about it. It is totally fitting to mourn over your sins, as you see the loss you've caused. It is also proper to be meek before God. Yet poverty, sadness, meekness, will not save you; it doesn't pay for the guilt against a broken law. It doesn't restore God's honor. It doesn't wipe away guilt. It doesn't satisfy the charge against us of holy justice. It is only the righteousness of Jesus Christ, received by faith, that will put you right before God. Blessed is he that hungers and thirsts after righteousness provided and seen in Jesus Christ.

Now be sure to hear what Jesus says. Even if your faith doesn't come any further at this moment than a hunger and a thirst for righteousness that is provided in Jesus Christ, you are blessed already. That brings me to my third and final reason why He calls you blessed—"they shall be filled." Your hunger and thirst after righteousness will not always remain—"they shall be filled." Jesus' original wording in the Greek is very strong again. He says they shall be fully satisfied or saturated. That means every need that we feel now, in this *not being righteous*, shall be met, every hunger pain for righteousness shall be filled. All our unrighteousness, our unfitness, will be covered in the sight of God by Jesus' righteousness, like a garment covers my body. All our unrighteousness, every lack of being right and of doing right, will be completely removed, for we shall all be made like unto Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. Psalm 89:15–16, in a brilliant way, states this promise in a different beatitude. Here it is, "Blessed is the people that know the joyful sound" of this Gospel and believe it. "They shall walk, O LORD, in the light of Thy countenance (that means "in Thy favor"). In Thy name (the name of Jesus) they shall rejoice all the day." Then, here it comes, "and in Thy righteousness (Jesus' righteousness, Jesus' doing enough) they shall be exalted." "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled."

I have a couple questions to conclude. Do you know this type of hunger and thirst? I mean this hunger and thirst after righteousness, after being like Jesus, after being conformed in the image of God. If you do, you are blessed man or woman. Now is this lack of your righteousness that you can't find in yourself bringing a certain sense of despair about yourself and about your self salvation? How blessed is this if this leads you to look and to depend on Jesus Christ only. Thirdly, has the Spirit begun to open your mind to the Gospel of Jesus, that in Him, God provides

us the righteousness and the obedience we need? How blessed you are, for if God created in you this hunger and thirst after Jesus Christ and Him the righteousness, He will surely satisfy you. So is His promise. So may God bless this message and again make us a blessing to others as we share His glorious truth. Thank you.