

The Heavenly Citizens Charter 4
Blessed are those who Hunger and Thirst for
Righteousness.

Isaiah 55, Matthew 5:1-12

At the beginning of the eighties, Reagan & Thatcher were in office, the Soviet Union was in Afghanistan, and there were times when one feared a nuclear holocaust. I was soon to be married and feared for my future children. What kind of world would I be bringing them into?

My main concern now is that Megan & Lydia, and now Isla & Edith won't have much of a planet left to enjoy when they're older. Pollution, Global warming, recession, population explosion, civil unrest, concerns about balanced immigration and now Austerity: these all spoil our lives and cause many people to despair of the future. Vast sums of money are being invested to solve some of these problems; expensive international conferences try to come up with solutions. Media pundits debate the different alternatives. And the fourth attitude, in Jesus' list of eight attitudes, which every true Christian possesses, has been there for 2000 years as the answer to everything.

If every man and woman alive on this planet was to hunger and thirst for righteousness, every wrong would be righted and every problem be solved. There would be no danger of war, no worry about pollution, and no fear of recession. No one would sleep rough, or be rejected because of AIDS/sexuality, or rot in a low-grade rest home, or starve in a refugee camp. The greatest single need in the world today is for very many more Christians who possess the 8 attitudes of Jesus. Authentic, full-blooded Christianity is the quickest and only lasting way of solving the world's deepest problem - the greed, ambition and selfishness which causes war, pollution, recession, homelessness and starvation. If every nation were full of Christ-like Christians the world would be a wonderful place - it would be the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth.

Already in the Mary's song (the Magnificat), the spiritually poor and spiritually hungry have been associated and both have

been declared blessed. For God 'has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty' (Luke 1:53). This general principle is here particularised. The Hungry and Thirsty whom God satisfies & fills are those who 'hunger and thirst for righteousness'. Such spiritual hunger is a characteristic of all God's people, whose supreme ambition is not material but spiritual. Christians are not like pagans, engrossed in the pursuit of possessions; what they have set themselves to do is "Seek First Gods kingdom & His Righteousness" (Matt 6:33).

Now Righteousness in the Bible has at least 3 aspects:

Firstly, Legal Righteousness is Justification, a right relationship with God. The Jews 'pursued righteousness', Paul wrote later, but failed to attain it because they pursued it in the wrong way. They sought 'to establish their own' righteousness and 'did not submit to God's righteousness', which Paul says is Christ himself (Romans 9:30-10:4).

Secondly Moral Righteousness is that righteousness of character and conduct that pleases God. Jesus goes on after the Beatitudes to contrast this Christian righteousness with Pharisaic righteousness (5:20). The latter was an external conformity to rules; the former is an inner righteousness of heart, mind, and motive. For this we should hunger and thirst. It would be a mistake to suppose, however, that the biblical word 'righteousness' means only a right relationship with God on the one hand and a moral righteousness of character and conduct on the other. For Biblical righteousness is more than just a private and personal affair; it includes thirdly social righteousness as well. And Social righteousness, as we learn from the law and the prophets, is concerned with seeking mans liberation from oppression, together with the promotion of civil rights, justice in the law courts, integrity in business dealings and honour in home and family affairs. Thus, Christians are committed to hunger for righteousness in the whole human community as something pleasing to a righteous God.

Martin Luther expressed this concept with his customary vigour: 'the command to you is not to crawl into a corner or into

the desert, but to run out, if that is where you have been, and to offer your hands and your feet and your whole body and to wager everything you have and can do'. What is required, he goes on, is 'a hunger and thirst for righteousness that can never be curbed or stopped, one that looks for nothing and cares for nothing except the accomplishment and maintenance of the right, despising everything that hinders this end.'

There is perhaps no greater secret of progress in Christian living than a healthy, hearty spiritual appetite. Again & again Scripture addresses its promises to the Hungry. God 'satisfies him who is thirsty and the hungry he fills with good things'.

(Psalm 107:3) If we are conscious of slow growth as a Christian, is the reason that we have a jaded appetite? It is not enough to mourn over past sin, we must also hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Looking back, we can see that these first four attitudes reveal a spiritual progression of relentless logic. Each step leads to the next and presupposes the one that has gone before. To begin with we are to be "Poor in Spirit", acknowledging our complete and utter spiritual bankruptcy before God. Next, we are to "Mourn" over the cause of it, our sin - the corruption of our fallen nature, and the reign of sin and death in the world. Thirdly, we are to be "Meek", humble and gentle towards others, allowing our spiritual poverty (admitted and bewailed) to condition our behaviour to others as well as to God. And Fourthly we are to "hunger and thirst for righteousness". For what use our confession and lamenting of our sin, our acknowledging of the truth about ourselves both to God and others, if we leave it there? Confession of sin must lead to hunger for righteousness. So, this attitude introduces a change, a move from the negative to the positive, a glimpse of the solution, a first flicker of freedom.

The phrase (M5: 6) is one of the simplest and most easily understood definitions of the good news about Jesus; it's the key to healthy Christianity and the answer to the most fundamental problem of life. This phrase also makes it clear

that human salvation is a free gift from God with no strings attached and that there's nothing we can do to obtain it. The whole world is chasing after happiness. Money, possessions, children, education, sex, hobbies, sport, art, church, and much much more are pursued in the quest for happiness. Everybody wants to find it and keep hold of it but it's like a slippery bar of soap, which slides away from our fingers the moment we touch it. Jesus didn't tell people to hunger and thirst for happiness, yet that's exactly what most of us do. We aim for happiness and miss it. Instead Jesus told His citizens to aim for righteousness and promised they would find happiness. The whole message of Christianity is that those who chase happiness are destined to be disappointed, but those who chase righteousness will always be delighted. Sadly, the Church has caught societies disease. Large numbers of people in every branch of the Church are chasing religious happiness. They go to Church not to give worship to God but to enjoy the worship. They attend conferences hoping for an experience, which will help them. They ask people to pray for them, longing for a quick fix, which will make them, feel better. They're hungry and thirsty for happy experiences, and can't understand why God doesn't answer their prayers. Its as though they've never read Jesus word's (M5: 6) they and only they.

Righteousness is an old-fashioned word which isn't used much today. It can mean the highest ideas about morality - loyalty, generosity, peace, honesty, and love. But here it means more than that. It can also mean the Christian idea of being forgiven and made right with God, yet here it means more than that too. Here in the middle of the attitudes and at the start of the Sermon on the Mount, Righteousness means possessing all the attitudes of Jesus. It means living all the principles of the sermon. It means being right with God, right like God, and exactly like Jesus in thought, word and deed.

On many London underground Stations there's a loudspeaker warning, which warns travellers to 'mind the gap'. Commuters find this amusing, because they think it unlikely that anyone

will step into the gap between platform and train. Yet some people do. Christians are meant to encourage their friends to 'mind the gap' between God and humanity, to mind the gap between God's standards and human behaviour, between heaven and earth. But even though it is a massive chasm (crossed only by the cross) most people ignore the warning because they're hungrier for human happiness than God's righteousness.

The desire for righteousness is the desire to be free from greed, ambition and selfishness - from what Jesus calls sin. It's the desire to be free from sin and to be free from the power of sin. But more than that, it's the desire to be free from the desire for sin. It's one thing not to commit adultery; but Jesus makes it plain in the sermon on the mount that, in His eyes, the wish is exactly the same as the deed. To hunger for righteousness is not to hunger for right actions, it's to hunger for right thinking, to hunger for the mind of Jesus - to be desperate to think His thoughts, share His attitudes and be filled with His mind.

Jesus also wants His followers to thirst for righteousness. This is more than a mild interest in righteousness or a warm feeling in Church. It's a passionate, all consuming desire; it's the highest priority in life; it's a sense of absolute need. Sometimes in the west we say we feel hungry, but only Children with swollen bellies are entitled to use the word hunger.

Sometimes on a hot day we say we are dying of thirst but only the man in a hot desert with an empty water bottle knows true thirst. Jesus wants us to hunger and thirst for righteousness in exactly this way - to be as desperate as the mother of a starving child, or as an animal that's dying in drought.

Those people who are poor in spirit, who mourn for their shortcomings, who are meek before others, these are those who will hunger and thirst for God's righteousness with a desperate passion. And Jesus promises that they will be filled. Their hunger will be satisfied. Their thirst will be quenched. They will be filled with God's righteousness, with the eight attitudes, with Jesus' way of thinking, with happiness.

When we feel what we call 'hunger' we go to the fridge and grab a snack. When we feel "thirst" we turn on the tap and pour a drink. But Jesus did not say that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will satisfy themselves. No! Like the starving child and the parched man, we've nothing to fill ourselves with. Thank God that the central message of Christianity is that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will always be filled. We can't satisfy ourselves. We can't feed ourselves. We can't fill ourselves. We don't have any resources to meet our deepest need. But we do have an all-powerful God who does give the food, drink, and freedom that satisfies that deep spiritual hunger. The filling begins immediately for the desperate. The 'gap' is crossed. Unconditional forgiveness is given for all past, present, and future sin. But the filling goes on for those who go on thirsting; they go on becoming more like Jesus - thinking His thoughts and showing His attitudes. And one day the promise will be perfectly fulfilled as the hungry and thirsty live with God, faultless, blameless, and absolutely perfect in Body, Mind & Spirit.

Only one question ultimately remains and matters. What is my greatest single desire in my life? A larger house? A new person to share my life with? More Money? Better Health? Happy Children? Success and Fame? Or to be right with God, right like God and filled with the attitudes of Jesus? How fortunate are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they - and only they - will be satisfied and filled.

Pastor David

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