

“Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,” declares the Lord.

Jeremiah 9:23,24

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

*...I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, **not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ** – the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.* Philipians 3:8,9

Blessed are Those Who Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness....

It is an interesting, unplanned coincidence that our address of Jesus' fourth Beatitude in this Sermon on the Mount series fell in this particular past week. The week started with football's Super Bowl and also held Mardi Gras, Ash Wednesday, Valentine's Day, and the beginning of Lent. Those all are holidays or activities involving the human appetites, self-discipline, and passions which are factors in Jesus' blessing of his disciples who "hunger and thirst for righteousness."

In Matthew 5:6, Jesus employed the metaphor of humans' physical need to sustain biological life with food and water to **illustrate the urgent necessity of seeking righteousness to have a viable spiritual life**. Medical scientists say that humans' strongest biological drives are for survival of the body (water and food) and survival of the species (procreation). Depending on their basic physical condition and their environment, most people can survive from 20-60 days without food. Without water, most people will perish after three or four days. The urge to preserve physical life will motivate most people to go to whatever lengths possible to obtain the necessary food and water.

The fourth Beatitude implores Jesus' followers to **consider the nurturing of their spiritual life to be just as imperative and urgent as obtaining food and water for their physical life**. It is a Beatitude that asks us whether we genuinely believe Jesus' words about the kingdom of heaven, and whether our manner of earthly living has eternal ramifications. It prompts us to examine our greatest passions and highest priorities, and to ponder the actual importance we place on our life in Christ when compared with all the other things we hold dear.

The Journey Clarence Jordan wrote in *Sermon on the Mount* that such hungering and thirsting for righteousness takes place in the spiritual journey primarily upon the ever-deepening foundation of the first three Beatitudes. When I first turn to face Christ's Light, I recognize sin's persistent danger and **admit my need for God's rescue**. That admission invites more Light which reveals the damage sin has done to God's intentions for my life and everything around me, **causing me to mourn**. The Lord responds with the comfort of his forgiving grace, creating in me a desire to fix what I've broken – until God shows me that only he has the power and wisdom to reshape my life in his image. My job is to **surrender that work to him and cooperate with the changes he makes within me**. When in meekness I yield that control to him, I am given a taste of the Bread of Life and the Living Water which nurture and refresh my soul in ways my own efforts or worldly pleasures never could. That taste of the Lord's goodness both satisfies my deepest longings and instills in me **a hunger and thirst for a steady diet of that Bread and Water which nurtures eternal life**.

Greatest Passions As I noted in the first paragraph, it is a bit ironic to be working on this Beatitude at this particular moment. The events of the past week could be a case study of the strongest influences on people's choices and behavior in our 21st century culture. Last Sunday afternoon and evening, over 61,000 people gathered in a stadium in Las Vegas to watch **the Super Bowl football game**. Each of them paid an average of \$8600 for their seat (some paid \$22,000). Almost 124 million people watched the game on television. Advertisers wanting to sell those viewers something paid \$7 million for each 30-second commercial that was aired nationally. The statistic which caused me to mourn most deeply was the \$23 billion that was wagered on the game's outcome. That's enough money (gambled in a few hours) to fully fund the operations of all the churches in America for four months.

Several strong human drives led to those Super Bowl numbers. I suspect the strongest one of all is the desire for money (for those who made it, not spent it). Many fans are driven by their pride in their city or region and its sports teams. For others, it is the thrill of competition and winning. Americans in general clearly are driven by a love for entertainment. The numbers this year were boosted also by a particular enthusiasm for celebrity.

Two days later came **Mardi Gras**, the Tuesday of excessive indulgence before entering the **season of Lent on Ash Wednesday**. I once read that priests in the 3rd century Church felt that their parishioners were not taking the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus seriously enough. They sought to remedy that by instituting the practice of 40 days of fasting from rich foods and other various enjoyments in the weeks before Easter. The 40 days were to be a reminder to the people of Jesus' 40 days of fasting and temptation in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11) prior to beginning his public ministry. Lent begins on Ash Wednesday with gatherings for worship and prayer, and **ashes marked on worshipers foreheads as a sign of mourning the death of Jesus** which atoned for humankind's sin. Not long after the priests told

parishioners they must fast during Lent, the people came up with the idea for the feasting and partying of Mardi Gras (French for “fat Tuesday”) to “get it all out before Lent began.” All these centuries later (at least to this observer who was never part of that tradition), it often appears that Mardi Gras gets much more passionate participation than Lent does.

By a quirk of the calendar, **Valentine’s Day** coincided with Ash Wednesday on February 14 this year. It began as a Church commemoration in AD 496 of the life, ministry, and sainthood of a Roman priest named Valentine. He was executed in AD 270 by Rome’s Emperor Claudius II for teaching his church’s men that they should not enlist in Rome’s army because Jesus taught his followers to love their enemies, not to kill them. Valentine also discouraged enlistment because the army enticed recruits by promising them sexual exploits in the cities they conquered. Valentine taught fidelity and purity in marriage so effectively that Claudius even outlawed Christian marriages, but Valentine continued conducting them anyway. **He paid with his life for his passion for Truth and godly love.** Last week, the National Retail Federation estimated that almost \$26 billion was spent in the US this year on Valentine’s Day cards, flowers, candy, lingerie and clothing, and jewelry. They did not, however, venture an estimate of how much of that \$26 billion was spent to celebrate marital faithfulness and godly love.

A Beatitude of Examination I don’t know about you, but I sadly find it difficult to imagine Jesus ever getting the kind of passionate response from people which was evident in the Super Bowl fans, the Mardi Gras crowds, and the Valentine’s Day shoppers. He came to offer us forgiveness, inward renewal and transformation, self-worth, meaningful life, and assurance of eternity with himself, yet few seem interested. As I wrote above, this fourth Beatitude prompts us to **examine our greatest passions and highest priorities, and to ponder the actual importance we place on our life in Christ** when compared with all the other things we hold dear. My reading to prepare this devotional took me this week to this profound observation from William Barclay, the 20th century Scottish theologian: *“[This Beatitude details] the main cause of failure in the Christian life. That cause of failure is simply that we do not sufficiently desire to be a Christian.... The great barrier to our becoming fully Christian is our failure to desire it enough, our deep-rooted unwillingness to pay the price of it, our fundamental desire not to upset life, but to keep it as it is.”*

A One-Item Menu William Barclay wrote that the righteousness for which Jesus’ followers hunger and thirst is really a multifaceted “rightness.” He describes it as being in **right relationship with God, right living and relationships with people, and right order – justice -- in society.** Barclay cites the Greek word for righteousness and notes that it is one trait which includes all three of those characteristics. **Without all three of them, it is not true righteousness.** The religious leaders of Jesus’ day prided themselves on keeping all their religious rules, but Jesus made it clear that his followers’ righteousness must exceed their outward piety (Matthew 5:20). John faulted even some of the more serious ones who privately said they believed in Jesus but would not follow him publicly because “they loved praise from men more than praise from God” (John 12:43). Teachers of theology often speak of imputed righteousness which comes as a gift by Jesus’ holy presence within, and imparted righteousness that results from the Holy Spirit’s empowerment for living as we were meant to live. In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote similarly that true righteousness includes both freedom from sin’s penalty and from its power, with both freedoms sustained by the Bread of Life.

They Will be Filled In addressing this Beatitude, William Barclay also gives the Greek word for “filled” to explain and illustrate the completeness of God’s response to seekers’ hunger and thirst. He wrote that the word is the one used to describe the “finishing feeding” of livestock just before they are sold at market – as full as they can handle. When Christ’s followers passionately seek his righteousness as a matter of spiritual life and death, as a prevention of spiritual starvation and dehydration, **they can be sure that they will receive all they need for each day’s discipleship** and will find new supplies of the Bread of Life and Living Water always at the ready when new sustenance is required.

WWJD As I worked on this devotional, I was reminded of Charles Sheldon’s novel *In His Steps* about a congregation who agreed together to spend an entire year living their individual and community lives only in answer to the query “what would Jesus do?” They found every day that **life is way more specific and complicated than our definition of righteousness as “right relationship with God, right living, and right order in society.”** The only real way to know what Jesus would do is to actually know Jesus. Fortunately for all of us, he longs to be known. Paul wrote in I Corinthians 1:30 that Jesus “has become for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness, and redemption.” To passionately hunger and thirst for his righteousness welcomes his Spirit’s living presence into our souls to nourish and refresh us, to teach us what he would do in the dilemmas that confront us, and to equip us to join his redemptive work in the world. All he needs is our priority and passion, **our willingness to be changed** by his love. Let’s give those to him.

--Ron Ferguson, 18 February 2024

Queries for Worship-Sharing and Reflection

- 1) What are the most accurate ways to discern what people (starting with oneself) truly “hunger and thirst” for?
- 2) If people really believed that eternal life depends on living in consistency with God’s desires, what might change in the things they are most passionate about?
- 3) How do you respond to the William Barclay quote in the “Beatitude of Examination” paragraph above? Is he right?

4) In your life, how have you seen or experienced God filling and satisfying someone's genuine spiritual hunger and thirst?