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Sermon: September 28, 2014
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“CRAVING JUSTICE-RIGHTEOUSNESS”

Matthew 5:6

■ Matthew 5:6: “**Blessed are those who hunger and thirst,**” who want, who desire, who have longing in their hearts, who yearn, who crave.

That is what “**hunger and thirst**” means, right?

Bodily hunger is the impulse to eat. Bodily thirst is the impulse to drink. At first the sensation is barely perceptible, but as it builds it feels more pressing. Let it go long enough and it becomes a matter of extreme urgency.

As figures of speech “**hunger and thirst**” evoke aching need, intense passion, and single-minded obsession. This is not about halfhearted wishing; it is a burning need that grabs hold of our attention and induces us to take risks that are either stupidly reckless or thrillingly courageous, depending on your perspective.

“**Blessed are those who hunger and thirst.**”

? *What role does desire play in your life with Jesus?*

What place does longing, yearning, craving have in your discipleship?

I used to be highly ambivalent about this.

{Rev 3:15-16} As a child I was encouraged to be zealous in my faith. The semblance of enthusiastic participation in worship, Sunday school, youth group, VBS, and Bible camp was rewarded with affirming words and pats on the back. It was imperative not to be “**cold**” like the Catholics or “**lukewarm**” like the mainline Protestants,

lest the Alpha and Omega “**spit [me] out of [his] mouth.**” (*I apologize to my brothers and sisters in those churches! That’s how it was.*) Consequently, I strove to burn with religious fervor.

{Jer 17:9} But not too hot! “**The heart is deceitful above all,**” and heartfelt desire – that is why Eve ate the fruit, and it is why David slept with Bathsheba. Private and restrained, spiritual yearning was OK; public and expressive it was alarming. Desire was dangerous: it lured the Church into shallow emotionalism and the world into unspeakable depravity. If desire could not be eradicated, it was to be kept in check. I was driven to keep a tight lid on it.

Burn with religious fervor! Keep a tight lid on desire! Trying to hold these conflicting priorities in tension confused and exhausted me.

Worse yet the more adept I got at generating external religious enthusiasm (or at any rate the *appearance* of it) the less internal urgency I had for the deep things of God. Not that desire *itself* died down; to the contrary, it boiled harder – but it became toxic. Every time I lifted the lid off to relieve the building pressure greed or gluttony or lust would bubble out.

The problem was not that I desired too much. It is that I tried to desire *too little*, and in part I succeeded. Then, when it backfired, I sought to satisfy my yearning in things that do not satisfy.

C.S. Lewis might have had me in mind when he wrote, “**We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and lust and ambition when infinite joy is offered to us.**”

If only I knew back then what I know now:
“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst”!

■ But we aren’t out of the woods yet. Matthew 5:6 continues: **“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.”**

Some listeners might choke on this phrase. To them it sounds about as appetizing as drinking a gallon of unsweetened lemon juice.

Say the word **“righteous”** and, based on their exposure to some churchgoers they picture self-righteous snobs who smugly presume their superiority over common sinners. Or they picture uptight legalists who fantasize that they are right with God as long as they *“Don’t smoke, drink, or chew, or go with girls who do.”* Or they picture religious workaholics who attempt to earn God’s favor with right belief and right deeds.

No wonder the phrase **“for righteousness”** turns some stomachs. If that is **“righteousness”** I’m fine without it, thank you very much!

But what if that isn’t “righteousness”? What if the Messiah has something else in mind? What if our language is inadequate at this point?

As a first century Galilean Jew Jesus was fluent in biblical Hebrew, κοινή [koinē] Greek, and contemporary Aramaic. But Aramaic was his mother tongue and he probably spoke in it for the bulk of his preaching.

However, Matthew was writing to a primarily Gentile audience, so he recorded the Sermon on the Mount in Greek. Since then, scholars have translated his κοινή text into several hundred modern languages.

Keep in mind that there is not always a precise, one-to-one correspondence between two languages. Some κοινή words don’t have exact counterparts in English.

Such is the case with this one. If indeed he taught it in Aramaic the Lord said *sedeq*, which Matthew rendered as δικαιοσύνη [dikaiosynē]: **“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for δικαιοσύνη.”**

Pick up almost any English language Bible, and how is δικαιοσύνη translated? **“Righteousness”**: **“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.”**

So when we read Matthew 5:6 in the Reina Velera we might expect to find *rectitud*, the Spanish counterpart of **“righteousness”** -- but we don’t: it and other Spanish translations render δικαιοσύνη as *justicia* [who-STEE-see-a]. Likewise, in Portuguese Bibles it’s *justiça* [jew-STEE-sa] and in Italian ones it is *giustizia* [jew-STEE-tzee-a]. These are all equivalent to our English word **“justice.”**

So, which group gets it right? Is δικαιοσύνη **“righteousness”** or is it **“justice”**?

It is appealing to over-simplify this Beatitude by narrowing it down to one word. That would be a mistake! We need both of them.

Not only so, we need them *as nouns*. Turning either one into an adjective (i.e. “righteous justice” or “just righteousness”) diminishes both of them. The

best solution is to read δικαιοσυνη as a hyphenated word: “justice-righteousness” or “righteousness-justice.”

✎ Δικαιοσυνη is “**righteousness.**”

★ {Ro 3:24; 8:29; 1 P 1:2} It encompasses our status before God as the saved who “**are justified ...by his grace,**” our identity as children who are being “**conformed to the image of his Son,**” and our lifestyle as Christ followers who are “**obedient to**” Messiah.

📖 Put another way, righteousness is conformity to the Law revealed by God in gracious covenant relationship with his people. It is a pattern of obedience to God in thought, word and deed that flows out of our redemptive connection with God.

It is tempting to privatize righteousness, as if it applies only in the bedroom and the barroom. But that is not right! Biblical righteousness is relational.

How did Jesus reply when “**an expert in the law tested him with [the] question, ‘Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?’** He said, (Matthew 22:37-40), “**Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.**”

✎ Δικαιοσυνη is righteousness – and it is “**justice.**”

📖 Justice is the appropriate treatment of other creatures, especially human beings, in keeping with God’s standards.

★ Justice is the practice of equity in personal relationships and in larger systems. It is compassionate

fair play in government, in the courtroom, in the workplace, in the market place, and out in the community.

The temptation is to reduce justice to an inflexible equation of precisely calculated rewards and punishments. We want our enemies to get what they deserve. But that is not right! Biblical justice is tempered by mercy.

{Ps 103:10} God “**does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.**”

Malachi 6:8 effectively summarizes the Old Testament call to justice:

**“He has shown all you people what is good.
and what does the LORD require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.”**

The Lord Jesus confirms that justice and mercy are bound together. In Matthew 23:23 he warns the teachers of the law and the Pharisees, “**Woe to you You have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness.**”

Δικαιοσυνη is “**justice.**”

Those who yearn for δικαιοσυνη are already “**blessed.**” They are favored by God, and by his grace they see the Son of God as he is, share his life, and participate in his mission.

Someday they will be blessed even more, “**for they will be filled.**” Their hunger and thirst for

complete righteousness in themselves and in the world will be satisfied when Christ returns, and the kingdom of this world becomes the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ.

This is all grace. It is God who gives us our desire for righteousness, and it is God who enables to partake of it. We cannot make ourselves righteous. Done in our own strength, even works of justice-righteousness are like filthy rags before God.

Still, we are not merely passive recipients in this.

We can enhance our yearning for δικαιοσυνη.

In August 2013 I was diagnosed with Type II diabetes. One of my nutritionists said something that really stuck with me: **“You crave what you eat.”**

I used to crave pasta, rice, bread and pastries (all of which are very high in carbohydrates) and I frequently indulged my cravings for them. But as I cut way back on those foods, my cravings diminished. A year later, it is hardly ever difficult to say No to those things.

I used to eat a small quantity of vegetables because it was the right thing to do, but they didn't make my mouth water. Yet as I intentionally added them to my meals – lots and lots of fresh ones! – my desire increased. A year later, nothing makes my mouth water like a big salad with a huge quantity of delicious, crunchy vegetables on top.

“You crave what you eat.”

The same holds true in spiritual matters. Nourish your soul with the righteousness of God, and you will want more. Walk a little ways in the way of righteousness, and you will want to go further.

▣ **“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for δικαιοσυνη, for they will be filled.”** Matthew 5:6 is the word of the Lord.