

HUNGER FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS AND BE MERCIFUL

Finally we come to a beatitude that says what it means and means what it says. The trouble this time is that it means and says too much: *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.”* Clearly we do not have righteousness, or we would not hunger and thirst for it. Obviously we would not be thrilled at the thought of being satisfied with righteousness, if we already had it. We do not escape the second chapter of Genesis. This is a broken realm. Alienation and separation from God, and from the will of God, is our condition and situation in this world. However, if we truly hunger and thirst for righteousness, at least we know what we want – at least we know what direction we want to go in. Until we awaken spiritually, we do not even know that.

“Righteousness,” then, is one of the huge words – one of the huge concepts. It really does mean, at its height, the rightness of God: being in tune with – being part of – God’s WAY and purpose and will; matching or fitting with the way God is, with the way God makes things and does things, and with what God continues to move toward. Apart from God (faith and belief in God) there is no possibility of “right” – of being right or of doing right. This is not a proof of the existence of God, but it is a thing we should mention to atheist and agnostic friends, since they so frequently miss it or try to sidestep it. If there is no God, then “self-will run riot” is the highest and best we can hope for.

You have heard the old phrase about being caught between a rock and a hard place? Well, that is pitiful and minor in comparison to this dilemma. If there is no God, then there is no meaning or purpose to anything, anywhere. Nothing will last long enough to matter; striving is only something we do as a natural instinct, until we get our bearings and figure out that it is pointless. But the jump from there to meaning, to purpose, to design ... is a jump to the Designer – to God. What kind of God? Some of you have skipped, or tried to skip, most of the categories our ancestors struggled with: evil, cruel, benevolent, indifferent, distant, hungry, angry, and so on. You all claim to believe that God is loving. But many people today do not seem to realize what an enormous assumption that is, or where it came from. All of us discover that despite our sincere assumptions and faith, on occasion we go back to some of the old assumptions, and then fear wells up from some primordial pool within

us. Maybe God really *is* mean. Maybe God is punishing us. Maybe God will throw us into some burning pit of anguish and torment in the end – like so many of our loving Christian brothers and sisters try to tell us.

In any case, if you end up believing in a God of love, then righteousness – getting in tune with, trying to match, trying to cooperate with, trying to be part of the rightness of this God – is absolutely necessary, absolutely impossible, and absolutely desirable. It brings us to utter despair – or to a great and beautiful HOPE based on the very God from whence it comes.

We are suddenly deep into Christian theology: Justification by faith. Being given a righteousness – a rightness we in no way deserve – because, in trust, we open ourselves and allow God to come be with us. Strange to speak of our *allowing* the omnipotent God to do anything. But God does not believe in rape. “*You will seek me and find me when you search for me with all of your heart.*” (Jeremiah 29:13) We *do* have to want The Presence with us. Nevertheless, our only hope is trusting in God – turning to God utterly. Then the love of God will draw us to him, and the rightness of God will rub off on us more and more, by sheer association. The relationship will change us, because of who and what and how God is – not because we are able to get it right or do it right by any merit or ability we can muster apart from him. And we do not have to get right or be perfect before God is willing to establish and maintain this relationship, despite the fact that most religions have thought and taught just the opposite throughout most of human history, including (too often) our own. The hope is in what will happen to us *because* of the relationship we have with God. The hope is not that we can ever get good enough to be worthy or right or heroic enough, or to accomplish enough, so that God will come to us and say, “You have earned a spot by my side. I can now accept and tolerate you, whereas before you were not worthy of my friendship.” That is no longer our truth, though humans have a tendency to keep returning to where they started, despite all that Jesus and His best apostles can do and say to change our hearts and our perspective.

Doubtless you have recognized my attempts to access a little “Pauline Theology.” And some people keep wanting to claim that it is “merely” Pauline Theology and has nothing to do with what Jesus thought or taught. Of course, to keep Jesus out of it, they also have to say that the Crucifixion was merely Jesus getting caught and killed by a totalitarian regime (the Roman Empire), and the Resurrection was a construct of wishful thinking which developed over the next several generations

after Jesus' death. That is a perfectly legitimate position to hold from outside the church – by agnostics. It's a free country. God grants us free will. Nobody is required to believe anything, and besides, compulsory belief is a contradiction in terms. God does not believe in rape. God woos us with enormous patience and unimaginable caring, generation after generation.

But if you choose to take the Christian Life seriously – if you choose to come into the church, *not* to swallow everything or anything whole, but because you are drawn, like so many of us have been from the beginning, drawn to the power and wonder of the God who chooses to reveal himself in Jesus Christ – then at least you read and study the records with some desire to comprehend what is being told and brought to us.

If Paul “made up” Pauline Theology, then this beatitude would read: “Blessed are those who love righteousness and who decide to be righteous.” Actually, that is how a lot of people *hear* this beatitude. But that is a far cry from what it says. It says: “*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness ...*” It is a great longing – a great passion, a hope, a vision – which draws us, and one we are never anywhere close to achieving. That is the very essence of how it is put.

So yes, of course, we move toward what we hunger and thirst for in every way we can. We are never content with the amount or degree of righteousness we achieve or display here. It is ever partial and incomplete, and laced with attitudes and motives that have not yet surrendered to Christ. “Shall be satisfied” is a future claim – unlike the promise of the first beatitude. True righteousness will never be realized in this realm, in this dimension. We taste moments of it; we act rightly from time to time, and the inner glow fuels our motives and warms our hearts, simply because the connection with God feels so wonderful. And even before we are through gloating, if we are not very careful, we become unrighteous again.

About twenty years ago, our denomination held its General Synod meeting in St. Louis. At that same time, as it happened, Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers of America were in a serious confrontation with the Teamsters' Union. Some people involved in that struggle had been beaten and one person was rumored dead, though I never heard that officially confirmed. It was a confrontation between strikers and strikebreakers. Strange that it was taking place between two “Unions,” but that is a bigger subject than I intend here. Some of the leaders of the

UCC thought it would be a good opportunity for our denomination to make a public witness of our hunger for righteousness. They chartered a plane and sent a planeload of the Synod delegates from St. Louis to the Coachella Valley to march beside the Farm Workers on their picket lines. The day was full of tension and fear. It was also hot, and there had been no time for training or preparations. I think that if the State Police had not shown up in force, there would have been real bloodshed. At the end of the day, the weary delegates boarded the plane and headed back to St. Louis. But the airline had also put its flight together in haste, so there was only one flight attendant on the plane, and insufficient supplies. The planeload of Christian delegates – eager to risk life and limb for justice and peace – turned ugly, unreasonable, threatening, insulting, and incredibly rude to the poor flight attendant who could not supply all of us with drinks fast enough to suit us. We could not remember to go on hungering for righteousness through a single day – though supposedly we had devoted the day to that purpose at considerable risk, expense, and inconvenience. Our denomination has always been very proud of that grandstand play. I am ashamed of us to this day. Perhaps some of the Farm Workers were pleased that we supported them for a few hours of their many long years of struggle. But I also suspect that an airline flight attendant and perhaps her friends were turned off hard toward Christianity and the church that same day.

Of course, deeds of righteousness *will* come from a love of righteousness. Never enough, but many deeds will come from hungering and thirsting for righteousness. The first step must still come first: Admit we are powerless. The source is God, or righteousness is a mask for pride and domination, no matter how many pretty words we pour over it or how much good we try to claim comes from it. Deeds of mercy ... helping people ... defending, protecting, encouraging, lifting up ... whenever we can, in every way we can – that is rightly what we associate with deeds of righteousness. But that is not nearly all of it. And I say this because it is the huge overemphasis of the liberal church in our time. If we *never* do such things, then hungering and thirsting for righteousness is clearly a pretense – a sham. But in the liberal church of our time, helping others has become an alternative – a substitute – for living the Christian Life ourselves. It is good to feed the hungry, but what about personal honesty and integrity – in the workplace, in the home, in the school? What about giving value for value? And keeping our promises? What about having annual meetings in all our conferences across the land, and General Synod gatherings too, and making sweeping resolutions on all the social

issues of our time ... when back home we do not pray, tithe, read the Bible, love each other, or keep any of the spiritual disciplines that would back up what we say, and maybe even keep our churches from dwindling and dying? The tail wags the dog. The cart is before the horse.

Righteous deeds flow from the connection with God. “Out of the heart,” Jesus keeps telling us. We cannot fix it from the outside in. “But it’s too slow!” we cry. “If we have to wait until we all grow and change and truly give our hearts to God, it will be too late!” Of course it’s too late. We all know that. Satan tells us so: There is no eternal life. Be in a hurry. Cheat. Nobody will ever find out. To hell with God – let’s fix the world ourselves. Never mind humility. Never mind the first step.

If we hunger and thirst for righteousness, if we love Jesus, if we accept the offered relationship with God, then *of course* we try to move our own lives toward the rightness of God. What could stop us? After we have mourned – gotten in touch with ourselves – we take specific action to clean up some of the debris – to get closer and stay closer to right and just behavior in our own lives. In the twelve-step program, the eighth step reads: “*Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.*” For many of us, it takes a while before our remorse becomes clear enough to move us past our embarrassment and shame, so that we actually try to repair some of the damage we have done. The twelve-step program makes a special step about becoming willing to make amends. The ninth step is about making the amends themselves. The tenth step is about constantly checking our love of righteousness, and moving back toward righteousness.

The Beatitudes, like the twelve-step program, are a WAY of life, if we choose it. It is not mere theory. We are never finished. We do not arrive. We do not achieve the goal. We live toward it with the Holy Spirit of an exceedingly loving God by our side. But we make progress, and that is enough to keep us grateful and eager in the pilgrimage.

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I do not have time to actually preach on the fifth beatitude: “*Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.*” Besides, you are eager by now to do one for yourselves, right? Some will say that it’s because I know nothing about this beatitude. Yet they still live.

Perhaps a few fast comments do not constitute preaching. Mercy, by definition, is undeserved. Forgiveness is also undeserved. What is the difference between mercy and forgiveness?

True forgiveness, though undeserved, requires repentance. Forgiveness is something we desperately need and want – something we ask for, even beg for. Forgiveness restores a broken relationship. Forgiveness puts us back to some place we have fallen from.

Mercy comes seemingly out of nowhere – it comes as a surprise, even a shock – and lifts us to where we have never been, and treats us as we never expected to be treated. Mercy often does for us things we were not even aware that we needed until after we have received them. Mercy expects nothing in return. Mercy has no requirements, and in fact, it acts before we are conscious enough to expect it or see it coming. Mercy is a surprise, and it is not a constant, steady condition. That is, it may come again and again, but it strikes – does what good it can – and departs. If it comes again, that has no predictable connection to the time before. If you can expect it or demand it, it is not mercy. If you can count on it, it is not mercy. We have a phrase, “He begged for mercy.” What he should have begged for, first, was a vocabulary lesson. What he really meant was forgiveness.

Mercy is beyond rightness, beyond justice. Jesus ups the ante to a level almost beyond comprehension (though that is His trademark): You have received mercy from God. Sometimes, when you can manage it, be merciful to others. There is no hint here that you will receive mercy back from those to whom you give it. That would imply a transaction, a bargain, a deal – completely incongruous with the meaning of mercy. If you forgive someone, you are stuck with them – you have restored the relationship. Mercy can be “hit and run.” Drop this huge goodness or benefit on them, then take off and let them deal with it any way they can. The Good Samaritan did not show forgiveness to the man who lay robbed and beaten by the side of the road. He showed him mercy – unexpected, undeserved, out of the blue, no strings attached.

So if mercy, by definition, has no bargain, transaction, or deal quality about it, why does Jesus say that if we show mercy, we will obtain mercy? Doesn't that sound like tit-for-tat? Does it make you wide-eyed with wonder? Does it surprise you that Jesus would make a careless statement like that – a thoughtless connection between categories which do not match? Well, it does not surprise most people. It's in The Book! You cannot doubt it, so why think about it? Just “believe” it, whether it means anything or makes any sense or not.

Yet Jesus' stories, teachings, and sayings are full of just such strange constructs. It's like He is always fishing – always saying, “Bite on the paradox, and let it lift you into the next dimension.” I am not trying to persuade you of anything; we are nowhere near any empirically provable material. Just a couple of hints: It is the nature of God to be merciful. We have not always known that, but Jesus frequently claims and proclaims it. So, partly this beatitude suggests that if we play with mercy, the merciful God resonates and responds to that. But many of us have received mercy from God, and long before we were merciful ourselves. Why the implication that if we are merciful, God's mercy to us will increase? Especially when we know that it cannot be a payoff or a reward. I mean, God does pay off and God does reward. (Jesus loves to tell us, “Great is your reward in heaven.” Jesus has no hang-ups about being mercenary, politically incorrect, or “above it all.” He just says, “If you want to take a bribe, get the big one from the best source of all.”) But mercy, by definition, cannot be a payoff or a reward. Wrong category.

It is an eerie hint, one we get a number of times from Jesus. We shield, protect ourselves, ward ourselves off from God. God is always trying to give us more than we will receive. Lots of the time, we will not let it through. That has a lot to do with why Jesus came in the first place. But in order to be merciful, you have to drop the shields and barriers for a little bit. You have to drop your guard in order to let mercy flow. Opinions about justice, deserving, return on investment, what is fair, all the other people with needs and what is fair to them, what the results will be ... mercy cannot flow with any of that stuff in place. Mercy operates in a whole different spectrum. It's kind of like a Klingon warship. You have to drop the cloak of invisibility in order to fire. Only, in this case, you have to drop the cloak of logic and accountability in order to send or receive the mercy.

So if you drop your shields around God, it is an opportunity for God to hit you with blessings you would not let through before. “*Blessed are the merciful ...*” for while they are trying to get undeserved blessings through to others, God is ready with some moves of his own. There is an old saying, deep in the tradition: “You can never outgive God.” Jesus is one of the few humans who ever truly knew it, believed it, and trusted it. Actually, the *way* He knew it, believed it, and trusted it is what made a lot of us start wondering what manner of human He really was, and if maybe He was more than just a normal human ... since the rest of us do not fully know it, believe it, or trust it.