

Now You're Getting It: Thirsting for Righteousness

Matthew 5:6



A man is crawling through the desert, dying of thirst.

The desert is blazing hot, and he's desperate for water. He finally happens upon a traveling merchant. He crawls up to the merchant and says "Water, please! Water! Water!"

The merchant says "I don't have any. I only sell ties. Would you like to buy a tie?"

The guy replies "No! I need water! I'm so thirsty!"

The merchant says "Well, I don't have any. But go west about 10 miles or so, and there is a small restaurant where you can get water."

The guy crawls off.

A couple of days go by, and the guy comes crawling back to the merchant. He looks even worse than before.

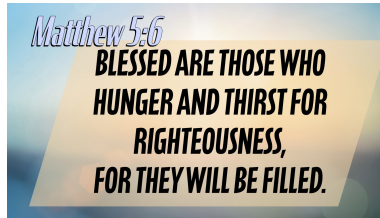
The merchant asks "What's wrong? Didn't they give you water at the restaurant?"

The guy replies "They wouldn't let me in without a tie."



This week is about being thirsty, but it's not about thirsting for water. We do need, though, to have that image in our minds as we move through this sermon. We need to imagine that feeling of yearning for what we need to live.

That is the central idea of today's Beatitude, because today's Beatitude discusses a spiritual type of thirst and hunger.



Let's go ahead and read that now. From Matthew 5:6, Jesus says,

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

I want to tell you before we move on today that this is actually the third version of this sermon that I have written this week. This idea of righteousness and thirsting for righteousness has been weighing heavily on me this week.

Now, one last thing before we jump in, moving into my third year of ministry, I think you all know that I hardly ever preach on current events, especially controversial ones. Today, I break away from that rule of mine, but I honestly feel I wouldn't have had any peace if I didn't speak on this today. So here we go.

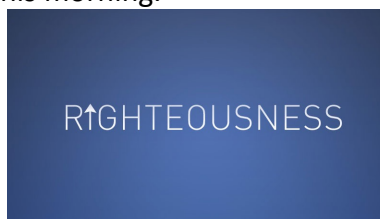


A week ago Friday, one of my favorite events opened on the world stage. I love the spectacle and the competition of the Olympics. Since I was young and watched the Atlanta games in 1996, it has captured my imagination and my attention every four years since.

And while I have still enjoyed watching the games as they have progressed in Paris this year, we all know by now that these games have been steeped in controversy from the very beginning.

The thing is, whether you believe the Opening Ceremonies represented a mockery of Christ or whether you believe it was a representation of Greek mythology and indulgence, the truth is that some form of idolization of paganism was on display that day.

But regardless of what you may or may not have thought about the whole thing, the response from Christians was interesting, to say the least. And it's in this response that I want to frame our discussion of righteousness this morning.



At this point, it may help to have an idea of what “righteousness” means. It’s a term we all have a general idea as to its meaning, but if we had to put it into words, we might struggle to describe it.

Literally, righteousness is right-living. It’s living in a manner that is morally justifiable. For us as Christians, living in righteousness means that we live in a manner that pleases God. It means that we want a right relationship with Him and with all of His creation.

So then, thirsting for righteousness means we yearn for that kind of life. Living in a right relationship with God, with all people who bear God’s image, with the creation over which He has made us stewards, that becomes not just a good thing – it becomes vital for living.



This is where that image of dying of thirst comes back into play. How much do we need water when we have an intense thirst? How much do we crave food when we are hungry? That is the same feeling we carry into our desperation for a right relationship with God.

I think we saw that in much of the response to the Opening Ceremonies at the Olympics. I think we saw a people who do desire that right relationship with God. We saw it in the desire to defend our Creator, to defend our faith, and to express our reverence for Jesus Christ.

I bring this all up because I think we got the desire for righteousness correct. But I’m not sure we got the method of righteousness correct.

Why do I say that?

While it’s very true that righteous anger or righteous indignation is a Biblical concept, that word “righteous” often gets overshadowed by the anger or indignation. We can and should be averted to the presence of sin in our world.

That goes with “Blessed are those who mourn” that we talked about a couple weeks ago. We should be able to identify sin and be opposed to it. We shouldn’t be glad or complacent when we are confronted with sin.

But the righteous part of righteous anger means that we don’t have free reign in expressing our anger how we want and excusing that as righteous.

The righteousness that we should be thirsting for is something that should be drawing ourselves, *and drawing others*, closer to the Kingdom of God.

And that is where I fear we have been missing out on truly thirsting for righteousness in our world. I fear that we allow ourselves to act how we want to act, or act how the world thinks we should act, and we call that righteous.

In our anger and indignation, I fear we have done more to drive people away from their first steps in faith to God, and thus have done more damage than any perceived attack from the outside world. And that does not represent righteous living.

Desiring righteousness does involve us responding negatively to sin.

But truly thirsting for righteousness should also be accompanied by us remembering we are poor in spirit, by us showing meekness to those who offend, by us being peacemakers as we'll talk about in the coming weeks.

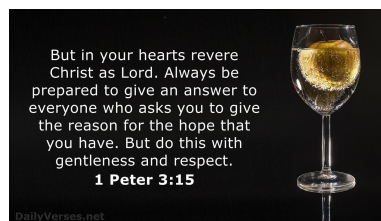
When we become thirsty for righteousness in our everyday lives, when we yearn for a right relationship with God not only for ourselves but for all of God's creation including those currently outside the faith, it should change how we respond to events like the Opening Ceremony of the Olympics.

I read the book of 1 Peter yesterday. It's not a long book. I read it in about 20 minutes, and I'm not a very fast reader.

It's a letter that was written to Christians in the middle of intense persecution. But their persecution wasn't just mockery and antagonizing people of faith. Their persecution was violent, bloody, and deadly.

Our world has always viewed this type of persecution as actions that need to be repaid. They mock us, we mock them. They call us names, we call them names back. They kill us, we kill them. That is probably human nature, and many may even call that righteous, even though it's really just vengeance.

But as the Apostle Peter writes to these people, his advice might be surprising. He tells them to live in righteousness by loving one another deeply. He tells them to repay evil with blessing. He tells them to stand firm in their faith, but to live as examples of the salvation offered to us through Jesus.



And in the third chapter, he says:

"But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed."

Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.

For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil..."

Do you know what I think is the best thing about Peter's words here? Around 30 years earlier, this was the same man who picked up his sword in defense of his Savior, an act that we would probably think righteous.

And yet Jesus, who knows he's being led away to be arrested, mocked, spat upon, beaten, pierced, crucified, and killed, tells Peter, "No, no. This isn't how we do things around here. In fact, if you choose to live by the sword, you will also die by the sword."

Peter has obviously done some maturing in his faith since those days. These are the words of someone who is now getting it. Peter now more fully understands and thirsts for righteousness in all things, even in the middle of persecution.



I think that is part of the filling that we are promised for hungering and thirsting for righteousness. It's not the temporary fulfillment we get for putting someone in their place. It's the filling that we have continued to live in a right relationship with God and His creation.

It's the filling that we continue to live in a promise of salvation, that no matter what sufferings are present in this world, we have continued to have faith in the promise of a perfect world to come and that God will ultimately exact His own perfect justice.

And our role in this whole thing is to continue living rightly by emulating Christ, who above all, even in the face of mockery and persecution, valued the will of the Father. Our role is to yearn, to hunger, to thirst to live in a right relationship with God and by extension His creation.

And if we happen to suffer for living like we are poor in spirit, for living like we are meek, for living like we are thirsting to do right in God's eyes, then we also live as an example to all the world.

We live as a people who have a great hope in salvation, who have been filled to overflowing with the abiding love and peace only found in Jesus Christ.

And that means, when it comes to thirsting for righteousness, we are finally getting it. And all of God's people said...