

“THE DYNAMIC OF A DESPERATE DESIRE”

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Mt. 5:6

It is a truism that what captures your attention captures you. Whatever it is that succeeds in occupying your thoughts will eventually control your life. Or, to refer to an oft repeated axiom,

“Sow a thought, reap a deed.
So a deed, reap a habit.
So a habit, reap a character.
So a character, reap a life.”

Jesus must of had that in mind when he urged us to hunger and thirst after righteousness. For, in our quest for happiness, it seems that this fourth beatitude forms the critical or turning point for most of us.

Up until now we have done pretty well. Through a sense of spiritual poverty,

“Blessed are the poor in spirit;”

and a willingness to repent of sin,

“Blessed are they that mourn;”

plus a turning of the reigns of our lives over to the sure, strong, hands of Christ,

“Blessed are the meek;”

for as we learned last Sunday, meekness means a harnessing of the wild horses of human emotions so we become God-tamed, God-trained, God-molded people; through humility, repentance, and meekness we have established a beachhead in that area of our life which is under enemy control.

We have made a start. We have put a dent in the devil’s armor. We have the enemy on the run. And then, just as the tide of the battle begins to turn in our favor, we often lay down on the job and fail to go on from that beginning to a life of unqualified conquests with Christ.

The result is that we live in a kind of spiritual no-man’s land in which we are too sinful to enjoy

being Christian, and too Christian to enjoy being sinful.

When I was just a youngster I heard a story about a little boy whose parents had the happy habit of including him in their prayers. One night after they'd listened to his little nighty-night prayer, they tucked him into bed and went downstairs to talk over the things of the day. About an hour later, they heard a thud on the floor. Running up to the little boy's room they found him climbing sleepily into bed. As the father tucked his little son under the covers he said, “How did you fall out of bed, son?” The little lad was almost back in dreamland, and he rubbed his eyes sleepily and said, “I don't know, daddy, I guess I stayed too close to where I got in.”

I think that is the dominant difficulty in a good many of us. We've stayed too close to where we got in. Instead of moving forward in a life of real conquest for Christ, we've been satisfied to be just under the covers. Just inside the border of the society of saints. As a result, we never fully experience the joy which could be ours if we really gave our lives, lock, stock, and barrel -- to Christ.

Well, the answer to our dilemma lies in this fourth beatitude --

“Blessed . . . happy . . . are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness,
for they shall be filled.”

These are strong, driving, intense words Jesus uses here:

“Blessed are they that *hunger* and *thirst*.”

Jesus wasn't talking about a mere casual, half-hearted, lukewarm momentary fancy. He was speaking of a desperate desire that nags at our soul. A yearning, a longing, a gnawing which will not be denied. A divine dissatisfaction that will not be quenched with anything less than God's best.

Actually, one of the elements of success has always been dissatisfaction. Not the kind that produces grumbling, bickering, or complaining. But, the kind that caused our Pilgrim fathers to set sail for a new land, determined that whatever the cost or consequence, the pain or penalty,

they would establish a new land where they would worship together in freedom and build together in peace.

That's the kind of undaunted, unrelenting determination Jesus had in mind when he said,

“Blessed are they that *hunger* and *thirst* after righteousness.”

He was speaking to a group of desert people who lived on the “margin of malnutrition” everyday of their lives. More than once, these bewildered parents had been haunted by a cry in the night as their children called for bread, when there was no bread to give. So, when Jesus spoke about hunger, these people knew what he meant.

That isn't true with most of us. For most of us, hunger is little more than a minor irritation which comes from having to wait a few minutes when our wife or mother fails to have dinner on the table exactly at the stroke of six o'clock.

Several Christmas's ago, one of my friends gave me a copy of a very stirring book entitled Three Cities by Sholam Asch. It is a vivid and, at times, devastating portrayal of the devastation of Eastern Europe. One of the characters in the story is a young man who leaves his comfortable home and goes out in a effort to alleviate the sufferings of those he sees about him. Despite all of his expressions of love and sympathy, there seems to be an indefinable, unexplainable barrier between him and those he is trying to help. He probes around trying to find the reason, without much success, until one day the answer comes quite unexpectedly as an unknown, unseen voice from the crowd calls out, “Have you ever been hungry?”

Sholam Asch points out that for most of us the only honest answer is, “No.” We've never really been hungry. And, until we *have* been hungry, or until we have seen the devastating effects of hunger, until we have witnessed the poor emaciated bodies of little children, their bellies bloated with malnutrition, until we have been haunted by the anguished, questioning cry of those who have never known what it is *not* to be hungry, and cannot understand why, until *then*, we cannot really touch the full intensity of Jesus's words.

For that kind of desperate, anxious, gnawing, yearning, longing, nagging hunger is what Jesus had in mind when he said,

“Happy are they that *hunger* and *thirst* after righteousness.”

And yet, while hunger can be terrible, *thirst* can be infinitely more so. As Ralph W. Sockman describes it so vividly,

“Thirst flogs the weary body with whips of flame. It mocks the desert traveler with the maddening mirage. His parched throat and burning lips become unable to frame words. Regardless of where he looks there is only the burning sands, the searing winds, the relentless sun beating down from a heaven of brass.”

And, as Sockman says, “These result in a driving, urgent, frantic *thirst* for water which overwhelms every other thought or desire.” So, when Jesus says,

“Blessed are they that hunger and *thirst* after righteousness,”

he is not describing a vague preference for the “good life.” He is not referring to a happy-go-lucky, “swinging-on-a-star” philosophy which hopes that someday, we will somehow, be somewhat better than we are.

Jesus is depicting the dynamic of a desperate desire, a nagging of the soul that longs to be right with God. And what is the object of this desperate desire? Righteousness! Being right with God! A conscientious living of each day with the knowledge that we are children of the King.

Now, like so many of our words, “righteousness” has grown flabby with age. It has taken on an aura of superciliousness which is repugnant to us. But, in its original form, this word had verve and virility. It meant: right-wise-ness. It had a keen, clean, cutting edge to it. It meant doing the right thing, in the right way, at the right time, for the right reason, without being told!

How desperately our generation needs this message. There are many times when we hunger and

thirst, but *not* for righteousness. We snatch at everything that offers even temporary satisfaction. We grapple for happiness in a way that cannot possibly succeed, for our souls were made for God and can never subsist on the husks of temporary pleasure. They can only rest when they find their rest in him.

That's what Jesus meant when he gave the first and great commandment,

“Thou shall love the Lord thy God with *all* thy heart, with *all* thy soul, and with *all* thy mind.”

He was describing the dynamic of a desperate desire. He was telling us to put first things first. To get life into focus. To see things as they really are. To realize that it profits nothing if a man gains the whole world and in the process, loses his own soul.

Edwin Markham put it this way --

“We are blind until we see
That in the human plan
Nothing is worth the making if
It does not make the man.

Why build these cities glorious
If man unbuilt goes
In vain we build the world, unless
The builder also grows.”

It seems to me that one of the lessons we can all learn from our text is --

The Necessity of Keeping Our Values Straight

It was St. Augustine who said,

“Two verbs have built two empires. The verb ‘to have’ and the verb ‘to be’. The first is an empire of things, material possessions and power. The second is an

empire of the spirit and produces that which will really last.”

I’m afraid that if our earth-bound generation has one besetting sin, it’s that we are more concerned about having, than *being*. Our values are confused. We need something akin to the experience of Captain Eddie Rickenbacher who, after forty-one days adrift on a raft at sea, came to the conclusion that many of the things for which he had struggled and strived in life were not really so important after all. When he was rescued, a newsman asked him what he had learned after forty-one days on a raft. He answered,

“I learned that if a man has enough bread to eat and water to drink, he is amply blessed.”

When he met up with the stark realities of life and death, his sense of values were sharply altered.

A similar experience is related in a bit of folklore about the Arab who found himself stranded alone in the desert. He was about dead of starvation when his hope were fanned by stumbling upon a camp where some travelers had left a bit of debris. “Maybe,” he said, “there are some fragments of food here to save my life.” He began digging frantically through the papers and empty cartons in search of something to eat. When it seemed his last ounce of strength was gone, he picked up a beautiful package they had apparently lost. It was a box of pearls worth a fortune. But, as the starving man stared down upon them, his hopes sank and he exclaimed, “They’re only pearls!”

You see, in the confrontation of life’s stark realities, he learned what each of us must learn, that possessions, honor, fortune, and power simply cannot suffice when we are faced with famine.

And a spiritual famine is precisely what we’re facing. The issue at stake is the life and death of our soul. Our true persona. If we would be happy, if we would live at all, if we would find peace, if we would be blessed, we must set out to satisfy those higher hungers which find fulfillment, not in a gadget or in a guy or in a gal, but in God.

Billy Graham tells the story of a man and wife who visited an orphanage where they hoped to

adopt a child. In a interview with the boy they wanted, they told him in glowing terms of the many things they could give him. To their amazement, the little fellow said,

“If you have nothing to offer except a good home, clothes, toys and the other things that most kids have, I would just assume stay here.”

“What on earth could you want besides these things,” the woman asked.

The little boy replied, “I just someone to love me.”

That’s it, isn’t it! People do not live by bread alone. We must have something more. We must have something which satisfies our higher hungers.

Dr.Bernard Iddings Bell puts it this way,

“Man is an animal, which alone among the animals, refuses to be satisfied by the fulfillment of animal desires.”

The prodigal son in the far country of self-indulgence was not satisfied with the husks the swine ate. He was haunted by a higher hunger. As one writer explains,

“He needed something more than enough to live *on*, he had to have something to live *for*.”

That’s what Jesus was trying to get over to us when he said righteousness -- a right relationship to God -- is the only thing worth living for. In fact, he said it is *so* important, it is worthy of our best and first attention,

“Happy are they that *hunger* and *thirst* after righteousness for they shall be filled.”

But there is another lesson to be learned from our text, and that is to hunger and thirst after righteousness is to recognize --

Our Need of Daily Satisfaction

The urgent desire for righteousness depicted by Jesus, was no mere temporary craving of a critical moment. A kind of grasping at straws by a drowning man. He was describing a recurring longing

which required a repeated daily satisfaction.

Again, how many of us try to grow in grace by “fits and starts?” We have occasional flashes of enthusiasm. We indulge our spiritual appetites in an occasional banqueting at the Lord’s table. We give ourselves an occasional shot of spiritual vitamins. And then, we wonder why it is that we have no real zest for living the Christian life.

Well, even as we must maintain a regular diet of good, healthy, nourishing food to have a strong body, so, too, we must maintain a regular diet of good, healthy, and nourishing spiritual food if we want a healthy soul. “Give us this day our *daily bread*” is the prayer our Lord taught us to pray.

It takes time to be holy. We must speak oft with the Lord. There just isn’t room for resting on our laurels. We must continually *replenish* the cistern of our soul. When Andrew Carnegie, the fabulous multi-millionaire, first started out in business, he was a salesman. One day he had a terrific response to his selling and sent a telegram to his boss, “Yesterday had my biggest day yet.” He could hardly wait to get his boss’s response and, almost by return telegraph, came the reply, “Yesterday’s home runs do not win today’s games. How much have you sold today?” What a wonderful motto for a Christian to hang on the wall of his soul.

“Yesterday’s home runs do not win today’s games.”

In our pursuit of happiness we cannot be content with the victories of the past. We cannot be content to continually parrot a testimony of what God did for us yesterday, or sometime long ago. We must press on toward the prize of the high calling which is ours in Christ Jesus. For, to hunger and thirst after righteousness is to recognize our need of a *daily supply*.

Then, finally—

When every cell of our body craves for a right relationship with God, when every fiber of our being says, “There is none upon earth I desire, but thee;” when we hunger and thirst after

righteousness we have Christ’s promise that --

We Shall Be Filled

We fall heir to a spiritual bonanza. We become partakers of the inheritance of Christ. We begin to share in the limitless abundance of our God. And there is no end to God’s ability to satisfy our needs. For we live in a universe in abundance and God operates on an economy of abundance.

All about us there is more air than we can ever breath, more water than we can ever drink. Locked up within this pulpit is more power than we can ever use if we simply knew how to release the energy stored up in its atoms. And likewise, there is more grace and love and forgiveness in God’s little finger (to use a figure of speech), than all of us put together could ever possibly exhaust though we drew upon it throughout the eons of eternity.

“Happy are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for *they shall be filled.*”

This is Christ’s promise of success -- Christian style! He assures us that if we are driven by the dynamic of a desperate desire, we shall succeed abundantly in being what we earnestly want to be: Children of God who live as the children of God should!

Do I make it sound easy? It isn’t. The sternest struggle of my own soul has been, and continues to be, in this very area of coming to terms with the fact that that which captures my attention captures me. I’ve learned that to succeed in the abundant life, to live each day as a child of God should, is not easy. But, easy or not, it is still there, and it continually beckons to me to come and tackle it.

Mountains have always had a special allure for some people. One of them, George Mallory, who completely lost his heart to the snow-capped peaks, became famous for his climbing. Shortly before his last, and fatal, attempt to conquer Mt. Everest, he was asked by a newsman what there was about the mountain that made him want to climb it. He gave a very simple answer, “I guess it’s just because it’s there.”

I think it's something like that for us Christians. The reason we have this restless craving is because Christ is ever before us as an image and example of what we can become through God's grace. We know our lives cannot *equal* his, but they can *resemble* his. They can never be of the same *strength*, but they can be of the same *kind*. And so we are drawn repeatedly to move onward and upward toward spiritual maturity.

Well, when George Mallory failed to return from his fatal attempt in conquering Mt. Everest, a group of newsman asked the other climbers in his party what had happened to him. I was greatly impressed with their reply, for they said, “When last seen, he was still going strong for the top.”

What a thrilling epitaph. They were saying,

“He perished in the pursuit of his goal. His face was forward. His heart was set on conquering. And, when last seen, he was still going strong for the top.”

God grant we may so hunger and thirst after righteousness, that, when our days on this earth are done, it may be said of us,

“He perished in pursuit of his goal. His face was forward. His heart was set on conquering. And, when last seen, he was still going strong for the top.”