

Barratt Ministries Challenge

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HUNGER AND THIRST FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS

The Beatitudes Part 4

by Maurice Barratt

“Follow righteousness”, said Paul to Timothy (2 Tim 2:22), echoing Jesus’ words in the beatitudes: “Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled” (Matthew 5:6). The beatitudes are all over the New Testament. They were as much a foundation in Paul’s letters as they were in Jesus’ teaching. Listen to Paul’s instructions to Timothy, “Follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with those that call on the Lord out of a pure heart ... And the servant of the Lord must not strive, but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves ...” (2 Timothy 2:22-25). I have emphasized the words which are identical to the beatitudes: but the whole spirit of Paul’s instruction here is the same as Jesus’ words in Matthew 5.

So many of the beatitudes escape an obvious definition. This one is no exception. What is hunger and thirst after righteousness? To find out, we have to look first at what is obvious. If you are hungry and thirsty, you are not a satisfied person. Hunger is a craving. In common with many of the beatitudes, hunger and thirst for righteousness is not a pleasant experience. The person who hungers and thirsts after righteousness is desperately craving that righteousness. They are terribly dissatisfied because they don’t have it. If they had it, they would be satisfied. Jesus does promise that those who hunger and thirst will be “filled”. But He doesn’t say when they will be filled. Is it in this life? Or in the future kingdom, where most of the beatitudes find their fulfilment? Certainly, no-one wants to be dissatisfied or frustrated. But Jesus indicates that this craving, this desperate hunger, this dissatisfaction, is a sign of blessedness.

What Is Righteousness?

Righteousness is what we are to crave. But what exactly is righteousness? Firstly, we must make clear that righteousness is not the same as holiness. Holiness is about being separate, different, sanctified or set apart for God’s use. Holiness has nothing to do with being justified or made righteous. Righteousness simply means right standing. If I am righteous before God, it means I have right standing in His eyes; I am justified in His sight; I am acceptable to Him.

God’s Righteousness

There are as many standards of righteousness as there are people. In the days of the judges, “every man did that which was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25). Each one had his own standards of

righteousness. I may justify my actions to myself and to others, and be righteous in my own eyes. But that is my righteousness - self-righteousness - and not God's righteousness, God's righteousness is what He says is right. We are to hunger and thirst for God's righteousness. But how can we attain to God's standards? How do we become righteous before God? There is only one way - by faith. Throughout the bible, righteousness has only ever been by faith. It is no good trying to keep to God's standards of righteousness by obeying the letter of the law and doing all the deeds of the law. This has never made anyone righteous before God. "Therefore by the deeds of the law shall no flesh be justified in His sight; for by the law is knowledge of sin" (Romans 3:20). The law only had one purpose - to expose us as sinners, so that "all the world may become guilty before God" (Romans 3:19). Righteousness was also by faith in the Old Testament. Paul gives the example of Abraham. "Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness" (Romans 4:3). "The promise ... was not to Abraham or his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of faith" (Romans 4:13). Faith, Paul says, was imputed (or accounted) to Abraham for righteousness, and it is exactly the same for us (see verses 22-24).

The Key To The Law

But we would be wrong to think that we are finished with the law. "The law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good" (Romans 7:12). "Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law" (Romans 3:31). We are to establish the law, to uphold it and keep it - through faith. How are we to do that? Here is the key: the law is actually all about faith, and the righteousness that comes through faith. The Scribes and Pharisees tried to keep scrupulously to the letter of the law, performing the commandments down to the most minute detail. But in doing this they missed the whole point of the law; and Jesus told them that they had got to the state where they couldn't see the wood for the trees: "Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites ... for ye pay tithes of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgement, mercy and faith" (Matthew 23:23).

What was missing from the Scribes and Pharisees' religion was the heart attitude of faith. They did all the outward deeds correctly but their inward attitude was wrong. Jesus said they were "full of dead men's bones" - full of hypocrisy, corruption and uncleanness.

Faith - An Inward Attitude

Faith was always an important, vital, weighty matter of the law. Paul noted that the law itself even witnessed to righteousness by faith, (as did the prophets) (Romans 3:21). It is the inner attitude of faith that God accounts of us for righteousness, and Jesus tells us that we are blessed if we hunger and thirst after this righteousness. The beatitudes are actually an explanation of this inner attitude of faith. They list the attitudes of heart which are the true meaning of the law. These are the things which the law witnesses and testifies to; the weighty matters, the real substance of the law. The law talked of mercy in terms of "Thou shalt" and "Thou shalt not". In the beatitudes Jesus sums up this weighty matter of the law: "Blessed are the merciful" - not those who are merciful because they ought to be or because they are commanded to be; but those who have the attitude of mercy in

their heart. They fulfil the spirit of the law. Likewise, when Ezra tore his robe and fell on his knees (Ezra 9), he was not keeping the letter of the law - which commanded him to "afflict his soul" on a certain day but he was fulfilling the spirit of the law. It was spontaneous outpouring of grief and repentance from his heart: and by it he became an inheritor of Jesus' blessing: "Blessed are they that mourn".

David also had the inward attitude of faith which led him - even when he had failed and broken the law - to express the spirit of the law in repentant prayer to God: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and contrite heart thou wilt not despise" (Psalm 51:17). David had the attitude that Jesus spoke of centuries later: "Blessed are the poor in spirit". We can see then that the beatitudes are just a fulfilment of the spirit of the law, and that when we have the right attitude- faith in our hearts, we will also fulfil the spirit of the law, and become, like David, people "after God's own heart".

Receiving The Promise

When do we receive the promise? "They shall be filled", says Jesus. When? In this life? A look through the Beatitudes tells us that although some of the promises may have a partial fulfilment in this life, basically they all point to the future, when Jesus comes in the fulfilment of the kingdom. "Great is your reward in heaven." "They shall inherit the earth." This begs an important question. If we only obtain this promise of righteousness when Jesus comes, if until then we only hunger and thirst for it - what are we to make of scripture's assertion that we can be righteous by faith now, and that indeed righteousness by faith is the only way into the kingdom? To put the question the other way round, if we can have righteousness by faith now, then we are surely "filled" now; and how can we then hunger and thirst after righteousness if we already have it?

Ongoing Faith

This is an important issue. To answer it, we need to first ask another question. Is righteousness imputed to us once and for all by one act of faith? The answer is no. Faith is an attitude, and attitudes can change. Righteousness by faith is an ongoing thing, dependent on our attitude of heart. Jesus' illustration of "hunger and thirst" is perfect, for our life on earth is a matter of being hungry, eating, being filled, getting hungry again, eating again ... Hunger and thirst are dominant forces in our lives, and our craving for food and drink will only cease when we die. So it is with righteousness. We hunger after that attitude of faith which God counts to us for righteousness: we seek after it, we pursue it. By pursuing it, we obtain it. But we always need to maintain our watchfulness lest we "fail of the grace of God" (Hebrews 12:15) or "frustrate the grace of God" (Galatians 2:21).

I believe wholeheartedly in "eternal security". I believe that I am chosen by God, not for any good that is in me or any good that I have done, but solely by His grace. I believe that I am saved "by grace through faith" (Ephesians 2:8), and that neither man nor devil can pluck me out of His hand. But I do believe that I can remove myself from God's grace - "frustrate" or "fail of" the grace of God - and I can do this in more ways than one. For example, if I do not forgive my brother from the heart, neither will my heavenly Father forgive me (Matthew 6:15). That means my sins are once more

accounted to me. I am no longer righteous if I will not forgive. Likewise, if after I have trusted in Christ, I begin to trust in my own righteousness (become self-righteous), I cut myself off from God's righteousness. I cannot have my righteousness and God's righteousness at the same time. We have to walk carefully. Self-righteousness and unforgiveness come naturally to our old nature. We have to fight to maintain the right attitude before God. This is what Paul calls "the fight of faith".

Unassuming Righteousness

The person who lives by the works of the law is constantly conscious of his "merit marks". If you believe that what you do gains you favour with God, you will become more proud with every deed you perform and every law you obey. Every time you are merciful to someone, you have something more to boast about; every time you give alms or fast or spend time in prayer - even if you do it in secret - you also have a secret boasting in your heart. This is the self-righteousness that the Pharisees were guilty of. But if you live by faith and not by works, you find that you The Good Samaritan's act of mercy was not a predetermined decision to keep a law; it was a spontaneous reaction of the heart to a man's need. And we have already seen the "spontaneous reactions" of Ezra and David who fulfilled the law because they had the right spirit.

This sort of righteousness is unassuming. The people who act in this way don't boast of how they keep the law. It never occurs to them to do so. They know that their actions are a natural consequence of God's Spirit being in them, by His grace. They spontaneously do what the bible calls "good works", the works that proceed from faith, (The man who lives by trying to do the works of the law only succeeds in producing what scripture calls "dead works"). These "works of faith" or "good works" do not make people righteous. It is their faith that God counts for righteousness. But the works that they do out of their attitude of faith prove that they are righteous - that they have the attitude of faith. Good works cannot save us or make us righteous, but if we don't have any good works, we prove that we don't have any faith either! Faith always produces good works. James teaches about this in his letter (James 2:14-26).

The Chastening Of The Lord Produces Righteousness

Hebrews 11 is a classic teaching on faith. This is exactly the same faith as we have been talking about, the attitude of faith that God counts for righteousness. In the following chapter, Paul draws a conclusion about faith. "Therefore" he says, (as a consequence of the fact that we have all these examples of faith) "let us run with patience the race set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith" (Hebrews 12:1-2). There are two things to note here. Firstly, faith is seen as a race. It's hard work! Jesus describes it as hunger and thirst, and Paul tells Timothy it is a fight. Secondly, (and more encouragingly), the source of our faith is Jesus. This attitude of faith comes from the new nature, which is the character and spirit of Christ Himself. "By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8). Even faith is the gift of God to us.

Fighting On

In Hebrews Paul carries on encouraging the Christians to fight the fight of faith: "Despise not thou the chastening of the Lord ... for whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth ... Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them that are exercised thereby" (Hebrews 12:4-11). Here we see that our trials, the chastenings that the Lord puts us through, produce righteousness in us. If we allow Him to deal with us, chasten us, and put us through no trials, then it will yield the fruit of righteousness: it will cultivate and nurture in us the attitude of faith which produces righteousness. In our trials, we hunger and thirst. Chastening is a painful thing. But we will be filled afterwards with the fruit of righteousness.

Let us therefore fight the good fight of faith, run the race of faith, strive to maintain that attitude of faith which fulfils the law, and hunger and thirst after the righteousness which will end in the great fulfilment of the kingdom. In this life we are subject to physical hunger and thirst, though we satisfy ourselves a thousand times. But in the kingdom, in a redeemed resurrection body, we will not suffer hunger. We will be permanently satisfied, "filled" in quite a different way, for the craving and the necessity will have gone.

So it is with righteousness. If we long to be "filled" in this life, how much more do we hunger and thirst after the day when faith will no longer be necessary, when we walk no longer by faith but by sight, when faith and hope are fulfilled and vanish away, and all that is left is love! In that day we will be transformed. The hunger, the craving, will depart for ever, and the fight of faith will be over, replaced by a "crown of righteousness"!

Experiences From Life

by Joanna Barratt

"My Meat Is To Do Your Will, O God!"

It was nine o'clock and time for the meeting to close. Although I loved being the church organist, and receiving praise for my spirituality from many of the members, I often found it quite awkward not being able to slip out at the end of the meeting if it was going on a bit too long. I just hoped that they would hurry up with the closing hymn and that God wouldn't "move" to delay me any longer. The meeting finally came to a close. I switched off the organ and put the covers over it and, after saying some very hasty farewells, made my exit as quickly as possible through the church doors and ran to catch my bus home. The journey was very short but it seemed to take an age before the bus reached my stop, and as I looked at my watch I saw the minutes tick away speedily. After alighting at my bus stop I ran all the way home to my bedsit and, as quickly as I could took off my church clothes and dressed myself in more glamorous evening wear.

At ten o'clock my doorbell rang and I ran outside to get into the flashy expensive car that was waiting for me. My companion was very worldly and very wealthy and, to my naive 23-year-old senses, the experience of being accompanied by him to the discos and clubs of Manchester was indeed very heady. Although the glamour and glitter of the nightclubs was exciting I found that my evenings were always marred by a small voice which kept telling me that God would not like what I was doing. No matter how often I tried to shrug off this irritating knowledge I found that I was forever looking over my shoulder and hoping that nobody would recognise me, for I absolutely dreaded coming into contact with another church member who would possibly expose me. I tried hard to be a Christian even in these ungodly surroundings, and for a while my Christian principles and "goodness" was respected, but I knew that this wouldn't last for long.

Trapped In A Web

My spirit was passionate about God, but my carnal desires craved the excitement that was being offered to me. My guilty conscience made me nervous and edgy, and the fact that I had to ask forgiveness from God so many times for the same thing made me too ashamed to pray, and I eventually lost my relationship with God. I still went to church and carried on my usual functions but something inside me was dying, and I knew deep within me that this had been the better part of my life. I tried once again to pray but this time the prayer was different. I didn't only ask for forgiveness, but in a flood of tears I asked God to get me out of the mess I was in. During this particular time of prayer God spoke to me through a vision and I saw myself caught in a huge spider's web, totally trapped and helpless, and then He showed me the spider just waiting until all fight had gone out of me before it would come and suck the life from me. I knew that the spider represented the devil and that the life being sucked from me was the spiritual life, and this vision only caused my prayer to become more desperate.

An Unexpected Answer

Within a matter of days I became ill with a terrible bout of flu. When the doctor saw me in his surgery he told me off for not requesting a visit because I shouldn't have left my bed with such a fever. For the next seven days I was really ill and extremely weak, and on the seventh day a relative came to visit who wasn't aware that I was sick. I was really delighted to have some company at last and Janet* sat on the bed and we chatted together very amiably, but it wasn't long before the conversation took a different turn and she began to criticise people from the church who had put themselves out to help her through particularly harrowing experiences. I couldn't believe what I was hearing from her lips and reprimanded her quite sharply for the wicked things she was saying. Janet was a "yo-yo Christian". When she was committed she seemed to be really on fire, but when she was backslidden she was up to all sorts of mischief, and she was so inconsistent that I never knew what condition I would find her in when I next met her. She had been delivered from demonic influences on numerous occasions and it didn't take me long to realise that she had allowed them back in. I voiced my knowledge to her and immediately her attitude changed, her face took on a completely different expression and she said in a voice that didn't sound like hers, "Janet loves you, but I hate you, and I want to kill you!"

The Grip Of Fear

I knew that what I had just heard was a demon talking to me and suddenly my heart began to pound as fear struck into me because I knew Janet well and, even with her natural strength, she was capable of carrying out this threat. I searched around madly in my mind as to what I should do next and, plucking up as much courage as I could muster, flung my arms around her and pulled her close to me telling her that I loved her and wanted her to be free from this terrible evil influence. But she just flung me away and repeated what she had previously said.

A Desperate Call

I was so terrified that I could feel my body going limp. I got out of bed, went to my handbag for my purse, and took some money out of it to make a phone call. I was living in a house which was divided off into flats and in the hall was a communal pay phone. When I told Janet I just needed to call someone she knew immediately that I was going to ring the minister of the church, and she followed me to listen to the conversation. My heart was pounding so loudly I could hardly hear what the minister was saying on the end of the phone, and all the time I could visualise her hands coming around my throat to throttle me. But finally the conversation was finished and the minister promised he would come round as soon as he possibly could to pray for her. We both went back into my bedsit, Janet stood in front of the fire, but I remained close to the door. Just like something out of a horror movie, the lights suddenly went out as my meter ran out of money, and all I could see of Janet was a silhouette lit by the fire. Then a terrible moan came from her throat which sounded as though it was coming from the very pit of hell and terror struck me so forcibly that I ran out of the room, up the stairs, and locked myself in the toilet. She came after me and began to hammer on the door in an effort to break it down, but after a few minutes of wasted energy she decided to go back down stairs and then, after a few more minutes of realising that I wasn't going to leave the toilet, she finally left the house.

Help Arrives

All this time I was speaking in tongues and looking out of the window waiting for the minister's approach. My conscience was giving me a terrible time because I knew that if I'd been a real Christian I would have been able to deal with the situation and helped Janet by casting the devil from her, but I knew that I was living a hypocritical life and that, in the state I was in, the devil would have just laughed at me. At last I saw the minister's car approach and it was only then that I dared to leave the toilet. After letting him in I made us both a cup of tea and we sat down to talk. My hands were shaking really badly and I was in a terrible state of fear, but after he had listened to my story I was amazed at what happened next. My pastor told me that he could see a white rabbit on the hearth rug cracking open nuts which contained lovely sparkling jewels. He could see it so clearly that he asked me if I could see it too, but I couldn't - he was seeing a vision. He then told me that the rabbit changed colour and turned black and, even though it was still cracking nuts open, this time the insides were completely different as they were full of rotteness and stank. He said that the

rabbit kept changing from white to black and from black to white, and I knew immediately what he was saying. God was telling me that He could see I was living a double life and that I was the rabbit.

Incredible Encouragement

A dreadful fear of God began to well up within my heart and I just waited for my life to be revealed to the minister. I knew that I couldn't hide from God's gaze and I was terrified that He would tell the minister everything that I had been doing. The vision continued and the minister looked at me and saw my arm begin to grow and become very strong, muscular and hairy like a man's. Then he could see me picking up a sword and wielding it with strength, and he told me that God would make me very strong if I would be fully committed to Him. The vision went on to give incredible encouragement when all the time I'd expected that God would reveal my sin and bring awful judgement and condemnation upon me. I was so relieved by the turn of this vision that I began to cry and, as I sobbed my heart out, I asked the minister if he would allow me to say a little prayer. I knew that God had allowed my sickness and sent Janet to scare me so that He could face me up with my own hypocrisy, because God wanted to deliver me completely from the web I was trapped in. I thanked God from the very bottom of my heart for His mercy and loving kindness towards me, and told Him that if He wanted me so badly that He would arrange all these circumstances just to set me free, then He could have me - completely.

The Light Comes On

It felt like somebody had just turned the electricity on because my mind and body seemed to be charged with such resolution and power. As soon as the minister left I went to the phone and rang my companion to tell him that from now on I was going to be a "real" Christian and would be breaking off my association with him. He'd heard all this before as I'd made many efforts to be free, so he came round to see me. But God had given me such backbone and determination now that even he could see that there was no point in trying to dissuade me from my decision, my mind was made up. God really did deliver me, and from that time I have been a totally changed person, and I know that there is nothing on this earth quite like being right with God. To have a free conscience and to be at peace with God is incredibly valuable, and often only appreciated when we've experienced falling into sin. I am just like everybody else, a weak Christian, and will make many mistakes during my lifetime - but I know where to get my food now. I've tasted righteousness and I'm determined that I shall never go hungry again.

* Name changed to protect person's identity.