

Righteousness: Matthew 5:6,10,20, 6:1,33

As I plan for Sunday morning's, I often asked God to teach me something that not only helps me, but that can be shared with others to help them. One of the things I often struggle with as a pastor is this overwhelming desire to do things "right". To do things by the rules, by the book. I've often been told this is the reason I was successful in the Army because as you know, the Army wants you to do things the Army way and if you can manage it, then you will be "right". Growing up in church also taught me to approach things in the same manner. After all, most churchgoers view church as a place where it's important to follow all the rules.

When I'm having one of those days where my thoughts are consumed by things such as this, I'm often reminded of the religious leaders during Jesus' day. As you know, Jesus was harsh when dealing with them. Rightly so. He was harsh with them because of their lack of faith, or their lack of understanding, or their rigid religious practices. In their defense, they were just doing what they had been taught, or trained to do. They truly believed they were doing what was necessary to be "right." They even believed all their religious ways made them "right" in the eyes of God. Externally, the scribes and Pharisees fit the part. They talked like religious people. They acted like religious people. They stood before their people as "righteous". If this was indeed the case, then why was Jesus so harsh with them?

What was missing was the internal part. They knew the rules. Taught the rules. Followed the rules. Lived by the rules. But the original spirit behind the "rules" was absent from their hearts. The same desire Jesus had for them is the same desire He has for each of us. Jesus desires for us to focus more on allowing our relationship with Him to be the force behind "all righteousness", than how much we feel we must do good works to maintain righteousness. To better understand this, we need to look at the Sermon on the Mount because in all the recordings of Jesus' teachings, it is there we find His thoughts about "true righteousness".

Let's look at the Beatitudes. **Read Matthew 5:2-12.**

The word, "righteousness", **which means to be morally right, or justifiable**, can only be found in the four gospels a total of 10 times. Of those ten, seven are recorded in Matthew's gospel, with five of them being used by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. In verse 6, we see the significance of true righteousness in the believer's life. We see that Jesus is more concerned with what's on the inside than what can be seen on the outside. Think of it like this. If we get hungry, you know, those hunger pangs start hitting you in the gut. What happens? That's right, we'll find something to satisfy the pain quickly. It's often been said that we are the most satisfied country on earth because we are the most fed. Jesus uses this idea of being hungry and being thirsty, which both present themselves to us physically. We get thirsty, we find something to drink. We get hungry, we find something to eat. Here Jesus uses the physical to teach us about the more important spiritual nature of who we are.

The fourth beatitude found in verse 6 challenges us to consider our spiritual appetite in a comparable manner to our physical. Would you agree that our appetite determines how often we partake, then how often we partake determines how much is consumed, then how much is consumed determines our physical appearance. Here, Jesus informs us that our level of thirstiness and our level of hunger for Him determines how often we partake, which determines how much we consume, which determines our spiritual appearance. Boy, I wish I could be as spiritually fat as I am physically.

Jesus goes on in His sermon to teach us about righteousness. Look at verse 10, the eighth beatitude given at the beginning of His message. He says, *“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake”*. When we combine the fourth and eighth beatitude together, we get this thought. Every believer should hunger and thirst after the kind of relationship with Jesus that is so good, others will come after you because of it. When you thirst and hunger for a lifestyle of righteousness it lets the world around you know that you belong to Jesus, and because of Jesus, you will stand in opposition to the world. At first, this thought can be intimidating, even scary, but I want to share with you Jesus’ reasoning for why it shouldn’t. From **John 16:33**, while speaking to the disciples, Jesus said, *“I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”* Isn’t it great to know the truth? To know that true righteousness only comes to us through Jesus, and it’s the same righteousness that protects us and gives us peace.

Read Matthew 5:17-20

Jesus teaches us in verse 20 that righteousness begins in the heart and works to change a person from the inside out and not the other way around. The scribes and Pharisees had developed, taught, and demonstrated a belief system that amounts to putting lipstick on a pig. They had created (without God’s advice) a religious system built around attendance at the temple which also involved following intricate rules and regulations and maintaining their precepts and traditions. It was very professional and very routine. They believed their works and outward appearance determined their righteousness before God. However, they only stood righteous before men. They stood lost and confused before God. It looked great on the surface, but underneath, it was nasty. Jesus wants us to understand the importance of allowing His work in us to be the determining factor of whether we stand before the Father as righteous.

Read Matthew 6:1-4

Here, Jesus continues His teaching from verse 20. His examples show us all the faults of the Pharisaical system. Their system allowed them to prove how righteous they were by drawing attention to all their practices. If you look throughout chapter 6, you’ll find Jesus scolding them for their hypocrisies in matters of giving to the poor, how they prayed, and how they fasted. In every case, they set out to draw attention to themselves. Acts and practices meant for worship and honor of God had been changed into acts and practices

which instead, sought admiration from others. Jesus teaches that true disciples seek a righteousness that doesn't need to be seen by others, only by God.

Finally, I want to show you one more thing. **Read Matthew 6:33.** This familiar verse helps us understand that righteousness, the true kind, only found in an authentic relationship with Jesus drives us to seek God's approval and not anyone else. This verse provides us with a life priority. What is it that truly desire in life? Fame? Fortune? Career advancement? A good salary? A secure future? A happy retirement? A marriage partner? The fulfillment of your dreams? As good as those things may be, they aren't the most important things in life. Jesus says, put God's kingdom and God's righteousness first, and when you do, everything else you need will be given to you. Seeking "his righteousness" means letting his Word set the standard for your life. It means seeking to do what is pleasing to him.

Jesus said we are to thirst and to hunger for His righteousness. That means we are to desire an authentic Christian lifestyle. One which draws us closer to Jesus. One that transforms us from the inside out and helps us avoid the praises of men. One that causes us to seek God's approval in everything. Jesus uses the metaphor of eating and drinking as the motivating power that encourages us to live a righteous life. This life is possible, but you must want it. Hunger and thirst can be powerful agents when we are desperate. Are you ready to go after righteousness in the same manner? If so, then put it into action. It's one thing to say you are thirsty or hungry, but it's another to get up and go after something that quenches those urges. Where should you go? Directly to the source. Jesus, who is "*the bread of life*", "*the living water*"! Don't go once. Keep going! Over and over. The fourth beatitude says those who are filled are not those who have their hunger and thirst met, but those who are continually hungering and thirsting. Don't settle for the bits and pieces either. Go for all of it. If you want to be like Christ and live like Christ, then you must hunger and thirst for the full righteousness of Christ. A Christian should never feel as if they have received all the righteousness of Christ because there is always more to be given.