

Divine Discontent

SERIES: *THE LIFE GOD BLESSES*

My four-year-old Cairn Terrier, Mitch, is obsessed. It seems to me he thinks about one thing all the time. He is obsessed with food, especially people food. When someone is preparing food in the kitchen he scavenges the kitchen for even the smallest crumb, sometimes catching them before they can even hit the floor. As we sit at the table he sits nearby and watches. He seems to instinctively know when I'm finished, because almost before I can even shove my plate aside, he is there; his front legs mounted on my chair; his eager, begging eyes; his mouth open as if he were smiling; his tongue ready to lick even the last drop of ranch dressing from my plate.

Most of us are not like Mitch. We may have a healthy appetite, but we don't go around scavenging floors and licking plates. For that reason, it might be hard for us to relate to the fourth Beatitude of Jesus. The fourth Beatitude is about hunger and it's about thirst. Jesus seemed to know that hunger and thirst are basic and almost sacred to our existence as human beings. Hunger and thirst drive us. It's not just the desire for water or food; it's things like pleasure or power, recognition or romance. Hunger and thirst, the drive for satisfaction, make us scavengers.

Advertisers know this. They take a product as boring as shampoo and make you think that this is the key that will unlock your love life. What are they doing? They are playing on your thirst for a relationship. They know you don't care about shampoo, but if they can make you think their shampoo can quench your thirst for love then they have won the game. The problem is they're offering us large bites of junk food. Their products can't deliver what we really need and want, they can't satisfy, and we end up hungrier than ever.

Jesus has a different diet. In Matthew 5:6 Jesus says, **"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied."** Jesus blesses those who have a deep desire to be righteous. He blesses them because they will be satisfied. Righteousness is not like junk food. Righteousness really does satisfy. As a matter of fact, apart from righteousness, we can't be satisfied at all.

I. What is the righteousness we are to desire?

But I'm not sure most of us would put righteousness high on our wish list. We may not desire righteousness because we don't really understand what it is. If you grew up in a certain kind of church, you might think righteousness is

all about rules and regulations that are designed to take all the fun out of life. Usually those rules and regulations focus on negatives: "Don't do this. Don't go there. Don't think that." Righteousness is seen as a great escape from the world, and sometimes it seems like the world is having all the fun. If that's what righteousness is, who wants it? Like Mark Twain said, "Having spent considerable time with righteous people, I can understand why Jesus liked to be with tax collectors and sinners."

Others think righteousness consists in having certain kinds of religious experiences. Righteous people hear God's voice. They are always saying, "God told me to do this or that." Bizarre things happen to righteous people: they speak in strange tongues, they see visions, they experience miracles. It's not that we wouldn't welcome a few of those experiences, but they just don't seem to happen to us. If that's what righteousness is, it's not for us.

Finally, there are those who seem to think righteousness is all about how much you know. The righteous know the Bible inside and out. They have Bible verses for every occasion. If you stick 'em, they bleed Bible! You're lucky just to get through a few pages of your daily devotional a week, but they've read all the Christian books. It's not that you're against a little learning, but if that's what righteousness is, you just don't have time for it.

But none of those things captures what Jesus had in mind. Jesus seemed to know that there are counterfeit versions of righteousness. They flourished in his day as well. Down in v. 20 he says that unless our righteousness surpasses that of the Scribes and Pharisees, we can't even enter his kingdom. He's not talking about having more of the same thing; he's talking about a different kind of righteousness altogether. What did Jesus mean by righteousness?

If we get to the very root of this word, we get to the word "right." Righteousness is character and conduct that is right. Of course, God himself is the standard and sets the standard. Something is right because it's consistent with who God is and what God requires.

Righteousness is like goodness; it's hard to describe. Writers and movie makers will confess that it's much easier to portray evil than it is to portray good. That's why there are so many more memorable evil people than good people in literature and movies. Movies like *Hannibal* are easy to make, but movies like *Chariots of Fire* or *Tender Mercies* only come around once in a decade. Maybe that's because righteousness is not a simple thing. For instance, it's always right to tell the truth, but there are some situations where it is even more right to keep quiet.

The thing about true righteousness is, most of us know it when we see it. It's attractive. It's real. It's not a put on. It's not for show. It's not just plywood veneer; it's solid to the core. There is a sense in which we look at it and we say, "That's how things are supposed to be. That's right. That's good."

Righteousness deals with us on a personal level. When we hunger and thirst for righteousness we desire what is wrong in our own lives to be made right. We desire what is twisted to be made straight. We desire to be people, both inside and out, who are right with God because we are right like God. People who are righteous think right thoughts and they do right things. They treat others right. They say what is right, at the right time, and in the right way. When we hunger and thirst for righteousness, we are basically desiring to be like Jesus Christ. John wrote, **"If anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous"** (1 John 2:1). If we want to know what personal righteousness looks like, we have to look at Jesus.

But righteousness is not just personal, it's also social. In this sense, righteousness is justice. When Martin Luther King said, "Let justice roll down..." he was saying, "Let what is right and good and fair take hold of not just me but of the whole world." This week we saw a young 15-year-old boy open fire in a San Diego school. He killed two of his classmates with a smile on his face. Certainly he is responsible for that act, but we wonder what kind of family, what kind of society, produces a boy who could do that. When we hunger and thirst for righteousness we long for a world where that stuff just won't happen anymore.

Righteousness is character and conduct in us and in the world that is right. Jesus says we are blessed when we hunger and thirst for that. What does that mean? Why does he say "hunger and thirst?"

II. What does it mean to hunger and thirst for righteousness?

Most of us can't relate to this language. When we feel thirsty we go to the refrigerator and open a Snapple.

When we say, "I'm starved," that means it's 1:00 and we're used to eating lunch at 12:15. But people in the ancient Near East knew all about hunger and thirst. If they had meat once a week they were considered fortunate. Many of them lived on the edge of starvation. They lived in the desert. The Near Eastern sun can turn throats into sandpaper. Hunger and thirst are intense cravings. Jesus is not talking about feeling a faint little pang in our hearts for righteousness. He's describing a deep and even painful longing. It's like a figure skater who has trained her whole life to win the Gold Medal. That's all she thinks about. It's the controlling ambition in her life. It's like the longing a man feels to be with the one he loves. He has no rest until they can be together again. To hunger and thirst for righteousness is like that; it means to be desperate, to be starving.

Hunger and thirst is a sign of being alive. In certain parts of China, when someone dies they bury them with food and water in the casket. The corpse never says, "Thank you." If we dug up the grave a few days later the bread and water would still be there. Corpses never hunger and thirst, much less eat. Hunger and thirst are signs of life. They're signs of spiritual life as well. They're also a sign of health. If one of my children doesn't want dessert, I might say, "Are you sick? Have you lost your appetite? When we lose our spiritual appetite for righteousness, either we are spiritually dead or spiritually sick.

If hungering and thirsting for righteousness is basic to our spiritual health, why is it we don't feel it? What are the things that keep us from craving it? Self-righteousness is one thing. If we think we are already righteous, why should we hunger for it? Hunger and thirst comes out of sense of our own need. Look at the first two Beatitudes. When we see that we are spiritually poor, when we begin to mourn over our sin, we see how far short we fall from that which is right. We begin to long for it; we begin to be desperate for it. Hunger and thirst always come out of need. Jesus doesn't say, "Blessed are the righteous." That's what I would have expected. That's certainly what the religious leaders would have expected. But Jesus turns it around: "Blessed are those who know their need to be righteous." The Puritans used to say, "The man who feels not his need to be righteous is the man who needs it most desperately." Usually those who think they are righteous have a warped view of righteousness. They've boiled it down to something they can manage, like a list of rules. But it's not that easy. Righteousness is primarily a matter of the heart, and the heart is not so easy to tame.

But we can also overreact to legalism and emphasize God's grace so much that we effectively cut out any longing to be righteous. The reasoning goes like this: "By the grace of God I am forgiven; I am justified; I stand before God clean. I cannot add to the righteousness that I already have by faith. Why should I desire something I

already have?” But that’s not what the NT writers show us. In Philippians 3 Paul describes himself as **“not having a righteousness of his own derived from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ Jesus...”** Paul knows that he has been given the gift of righteousness, not through works but through faith. But later in the same chapter he says, **“I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus... forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”** Paul pressed on to become practically what he already was positionally. Don’t let the grace of justification cut off your passion for sanctification.

Another reason we don’t experience this hunger is that we keep filling ourselves with the wrong things. We’re like children who eat so much junk food at 4:00 PM they have no appetite for the good food at dinner time. Here’s how it works in my life. Maybe I go through a time when I see my sinfulness and I really feel the desire to be righteous. There is usually some pain that goes along with that. Genuine hunger and thirst is not a pleasant experience. So what do I do? Instead of trusting God, I try to medicate the pain. Maybe it’s TV. Maybe it’s overwork. Maybe it’s going out and buying something. Do you ever just feel like buying something? You don’t really need it; you just think it will make you feel better: a faster computer, a sportier car, a bigger TV. It doesn’t have to even be expensive; it’s just a hankering for something new.

The problem is, these things don’t satisfy us. Jesus says those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be satisfied. It’s the filling of this desire that will bring true satisfaction to our lives.

III. How will our desire for righteousness be satisfied?

It’s funny how this works. The more God satisfies our hunger and thirst for righteousness, the more we want it. You can’t lick it with one meal. It’s like Thanksgiving dinner. How many times have we pulled away from the Thanksgiving meal thinking, “I don’t think I could ever eat again!” But there we are at 7:30 that same evening, making a turkey sandwich! Feeding at God’s table once brings great satisfaction, but it doesn’t take care of hungering and thirsting forever. Jesus said, **“I am the bread of life, he who comes to me will never hunger, and he who believes in me will never thirst”** (Jn. 6:35). Yet, we have to keep eating, we have to keep drinking.

As a young man David wrote the 23rd Psalm where he said, **“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.”** That sounds like a man who is satisfied to me. He had the Lord; he lacked nothing, he wanted nothing. Yet later in his life he wrote Psalm 42, where he wrote, **“As**

the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?”

The Christian life is a continuous cycle of satisfaction and hunger. When we trust Christ the first time we are justified. That literally means we are made righteous. That brings great satisfaction to us. We are forgiven. We are clean. We are pleasing to him. What joy! But then the Holy Spirit begins to show us how unrighteous we are. We find ourselves wanting to be like Christ. We see how he treated people and we want to be like that. So we begin to pray and perhaps we see some progress. That also brings satisfaction to us. We say, “Hey, I’m growing! I becoming more like Christ. I handled that situation differently than I would have before.” The Bible calls this sanctification. Sanctification is the process of becoming more and more like Christ. The thing about sanctification is that it’s never finished until we see Jesus. So once we have one area where we see progress, the Holy Spirit reveals another and we begin to hunger and thirst again. This process will go on our entire lives. It can be a little discouraging at times, because as soon as we think we’re making progress, we see how short we fall. But the day will come when we will be finally and fully satisfied. John says, **“Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that when he appears, we will be like him, because we will see him just as he is”** (1 John 3:2). And it won’t be just us, it will be the whole world. Listen to how Peter describes our hope as followers of Christ: **“In keeping with his promise, we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness”** (2 Pt. 3:13). The thing that characterizes the new creation is righteousness, and that’s what satisfies.

IV. How do we develop an appetite for righteousness?

The problem is, if we don’t hunger and thirst for the right thing, we won’t be blessed; we won’t find true satisfaction. The question is, what are we hungry and thirsty for? I’ve had to ask myself that question this week. It seems to me if we’re not hungry and thirsty for righteousness, maybe we haven’t developed a taste for it.

When I was a kid, I hated coffee. As a matter of fact, I’ve never known anyone who naturally likes coffee. And yet, I can hardly go a day without coffee. I’ve developed a taste for coffee. I’ve developed such a taste for coffee that I have a hard time drinking anything but my brand of very strong coffee. I wake up in the morning and I crave that coffee. Esau said to his brother, “Give me some of that red stuff.” I say, “Give me some of that black stuff!”

How do we develop a taste like that for righteousness? Of course, you have to start by trusting Christ as Lord and Savior because when you do that, the Holy Spirit comes and dwells in you, and without the Holy Spirit

no one hungers for righteousness. But Scripture says we can quench the Spirit's work in our lives, so that we no longer crave righteousness. Let me suggest three ways you can keep your appetite for righteousness strong and healthy.

First, use it. You develop a taste for coffee by using it. You develop a taste for righteousness by using it. That means if you are nursing sin in your life, if you are allowing some area of compromise in your walk with Christ, you will actually lose your taste for righteousness. But the more you obey Christ, the more you put to death the deeds of the flesh and put on Christ, the more you will love it and want it. Use it or lose it. For instance, 20 million adults visit pornographic web sights each month. If you are nursing that sin, if you are feeding your flesh with that, you will lose your appetite for righteousness. So deal with it. Get some help if you have to.

Second, nurture it. Most people start out drinking coffee by using large doses of cream and sugar. You nurture your taste for righteousness by using the means of grace that God has given us. Scripture, prayer, worship, fellowship...just to name a few. Add these things to your diet, and you will find they enhance the taste of righteousness; they will actually make you want it more. How are your spiritual disciplines these days? Are you in the Word on a regular basis? Are you developing a holy habit of prayer? Is corporate worship such as this something you do only when the skiing is bad? Do you have Christian fellowship that really allows you to get down to the brass tacks of your walk with Christ?

Third, yield to it. Here's what I mean. God's chief way of developing in us an appetite for righteousness is pain. When I am most tired I want coffee real bad. When life beats me up, I want righteousness real bad. That hard thing in your life, that person you wish you could get rid of, that situation you wish you could get out of, that may be the very thing God is using to make you long for righteousness. That's why He tells us to **"exult in our tribulations...because tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, proven character..."** (Romans 5:3-4). Yield to God's severe mercy of bringing tough things into your life that make you hungry for him.

If we don't develop an appetite for righteousness, if we don't use it, if we don't nurture it, if we don't yield to the things God puts in our lives, we won't know what it means to really be satisfied. Only righteousness really satisfies, and only those who hunger and thirst for it will get it.