

saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Eph. 2.8-10).

To use some old terminology, we are made right with God when the righteousness of God is **imputed** to us by faith. But we also “hunger and thirst” for that righteousness to be **imparted** to us.

Filled with Righteousness

The hunger and thirst for righteousness **will** be filled. By word and action, Jesus declared again and again God’s desire to accept people back into fellowship. We see this, not only in the parable already noted, but also in the story of the prodigal son – welcomed back with robe, ring, sandals and a feast (Lk. 15.11-32). We see it, too, in the call of Matthew – and the dinner with Matthew’s friends (Mt. 9.9-13).

It all says loud and clear to us that God wants us back! What is more, Christ came to make it possible for us to come back! The righteous one has died for the unrighteous (1 Pet. 3.18). The blessing is available for all to receive!

We notice Jesus’ reaction to the woman, a known sinner, who anointed his feet with the precious ointment (Lk. 7.36-50). Her extravagant love was in response to her many sins having been forgiven. That forgiveness is already working a change in her life.

In the call of Zacchaeus, too, we see the beginnings of imparted righteousness – “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount” (Lk. 19.1-10). God hasn’t finished with us yet!

Reflect:

- Forgiven and filled? In what areas do we feel that God is still working change in our lives?
- In what new directions has the Lord been speaking to us through this study? What are we going to do about it?

Study 6 – ... the Merciful. Reading: Matthew 18.21-35

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Ten Studies on the Beatitudes

by Peter J Blackburn

5. ... the Hungry and Thirsty

Reading: Acts 17.22-31; Matthew 5.17-20, 43-48.

We come in around meal-time and describe ourselves as a bit “peckish”. Or, tired from a day’s work, we are enticed by the smells coming from the kitchen and say we are “starved” or even “ravenous”. Really? We hardly know what starvation is – except when our television screen portrays undernourishment and starvation in some other country.

In themselves, hunger and thirst are natural and healthy signs of life. In times of sickness, we may “go off” our food. One of the signs of our recovery is that have “got our appetite back”.

Physical hunger usually describes a passionate urge for food. We use the word “hunger” in other ways too – whether for sex, money, ambition... Many moral principles may well be sacrificed in the urge to gain these goals.

In an age when many seem to think, “Happy are those with strong personal ambition – they will achieve their goals”, Jesus, the Master Teacher, says, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (Mt. 5.6).

Reflect:

- What seem to be the “passionate urges” of the age in which we live?
- “Many moral principles may well be sacrificed in the urge to gain these goals”. Do you agree? Why is this so?

Hunger and Thirst for God

Read: Acts 17.22-31

Normal hunger and thirst are good. They are part of God’s good design, reminding us of our need for food and drink. To neglect our hunger and thirst is to put our physical life at peril.

However, God has made us with hunger and thirst, not just for food and drink, but for fellowship with himself – the passionate urge to know and be rightly related to him. Because it is part of God’s design, it is not

surprising that, as someone has put it, “humankind is incurably religious”. A study of history reveals that in every age people have cherished a belief in gods, one or many. This “religious instinct”, as it has been called, has been one of the most important influences in shaping the life of both individuals and nations.

There is, of course, not only the Creator’s intention, but the Fall – the reality of human sin and brokenness. Nevertheless, no matter how twisted and distorted “religion” and human “values” may be, they still bear witness to the God-given desire to know God. When Paul was in Athens, he was “greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols” (Acts 17.16). Yet, speaking to the meeting of the Areopagus, he could comment that they were “very religious” – even to the point of having an altar “to an unknown god” (Acts 17.22-23). Their religion (and some of their poetry too! v. 28) was testimony to the reality of the God who has revealed himself in Jesus, the God who in the past “overlooked such ignorance, but now calls all people everywhere to repent” (v. 30).

We find this yearning to know God in some of the Psalms too. “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?” (Ps 42.1-2) “How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord Almighty! My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God” (84.1-2). Or in Isaiah – “Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat!... Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon” (Is 55.1,6,7).

Reflect:

- “God has made us with hunger and thirst, not just for food and drink, but for fellowship with himself – the passionate urge to know and be rightly related to him”. In what ways do we see that expressed in our society? even by atheists?
- Consider our own experience. For us, what was the route by which a yearning to know God was transformed into a faith in the God who has revealed himself in Jesus?

Right with God

Read: Matthew 5.17-20,43-48.

Just what is meant by the “righteousness” for which we are to hunger and thirst?

In fact, righteousness is a state of being right with God. Unfortunately, then, as now, people mistook what makes a person right with God. It all seemed to depend on having an outward appearance of upright living and piety. But the righteousness Jesus refers to goes far beyond an outward observance of the Law – “For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 5.20).

A number of illustrations follow indicating that this righteousness works from the inside out, coming from a heart and life transformed. It’s not just a matter of avoiding murder, but not being angry (vv. 21-26). It’s not enough to be sexually faithful, and then have lustful thoughts (vv. 27-30)... Love has to extend beyond our friends to our enemies. Indeed, the standard isn’t “the bloke next door” – “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (vv. 43-48).

In our second study, we read the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Lk. 18.9-14). The tax collector came acknowledging his sin and asking for God’s mercy – Jesus said, “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God”. In the original, the word “justified” is a direct relative of “righteousness”.

We become righteous, or right with God, not by making ourselves good, but by coming to God for his forgiveness – by accepting the gift of his mercy in Jesus Christ. Not one of us is “good enough” by ourselves. We all fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3.23).

Reflect:

- It seems ironic, doesn’t it? Jesus says our righteousness is to “surpass that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law”, yet it is the tax collector who is “justified”. How do we understand “righteousness” and “justification”?

That isn’t the end of the matter, of course. This “righteousness” is then worked out in life **because** we have been accepted, not **so that** God will accept us. Paul makes a similar point when he writes, “For it is by grace you have been