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Presentation Transcript
Hungering for Righteousness
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Hungering for Righteousness – fourth part of a series on *Applying the Beatitudes in Everyday Life*.

I was thinking about ten years ago, when I was doing my Master's program. Before class one day, there was a young woman who was talking about how she'd gone to church with her boyfriend that weekend. Several people in the class asked her how she liked it. She said, "Well, the music was great, and I really like talking to everybody, but I didn't like that sermon." They said, "What was it that you didn't like?" She said, "Well, he talked about how we needed to obey the Ten Commandments. And that's just *way* too restrictive for me."

So our topic today is *hungering for righteousness*. And righteousness – at least, one aspect of it – is obeying the Law of God. So I was thinking about that and how many people find obedience to God a restriction and how many people don't really hunger for righteousness. They hunger for freedom – freedom to do whatever they want. And yet, God says that people who hunger for righteousness...they're going to be filled. So it's important to people who hope to live with God, but it's foolishness to those who don't. To obey God is a foolish thing to them. But is it important to you? That's probably the most relevant question.

Well, we're going to take a look at the fourth beatitude today and see what it has for us in our everyday life. Maybe the first question to ask is, "Righteousness – what is it?" Well, really, I think, the main thing that to me is that it's to be with God. It has to do, first of all, with obeying God. Psalm 119, verse 172, says, *All thy commands are righteousness*. So that's a biblical definition of what righteousness is. I won't turn to the scriptures now, because we talk about these all the time, but we're told, in the Bible, that God's commandments are the application of His love – the end result of obedience to God is godly love. John told us, in 1 John, that God *is* love. So, as we move toward obedience to God, we're actually moving toward the character of God, and being like God, and drawing closer to God all at the same time. So it means to be in relationship with God, if you look at it that way.

Let's go to Psalm 84, and think about one aspect of being close to God. In verse 10 of Psalm 84, David said:

Psa. 84:10 – *Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than to dwell in the tents of the wicked.*

So the Jews, in their poetry, they opposed ideas. So, if you're a doorkeeper in the house of God, as opposed to being a dweller in the tents of the wicked, those two are opposite things. The wicked people do not get to live with God in His courts. So those people have to be obedient to God.

V-11 – *For the LORD God, who is a sun and shield, the LORD bestows favor and honor. No good thing does He withhold from those whose walk is blameless.*

So, if you look at that verse, what it is telling us is, we either get to be with God, or we can be wicked. Those are the only options we have. We're either going one way down the road or we're going the other way along it. That's the biblical position – the biblical worldview.

Then, it says in Matthew 5, and verse 6, which is our core scripture for today:

Mt. 5:6 – *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*

All the people that think those Ten Commandments are too restrictive are going to have to get over that, if they want to live in God's Kingdom forever. So the whole idea of being righteous is one of allusiveness. It's difficult. Since I've been seventeen, I've been trying to be a Christian, and it's the most allusive goal I've ever tried to achieve. And I'm very thankful for this verse, because it does not say that I have to achieve it. It says that I have to *want* to achieve it – that I have to *hunger* for righteousness. We can do that with God's help.

Let's look again at something else that David said. It's in Psalm 42. He says:

Psa. 42:1 – *As the deer pants for stream of water, so my soul pants for You, O God. My soul thirsts for the living God.* So we can hunger and thirst for righteousness, but we have to *really* hunger and thirst for it – like that deer that's been running for a long time and stops at the stream to drink some water before it continues on. It's not like the man who said, "I would love to be able to play the piano," but what he means by that is, he wants to be good at it without having to practice – without having to *commit* himself to it, without having to put any *effort* into it. Everybody wants to go to heaven, or to be in the Kingdom of God, or to live with God in God's courts forever, or however you want to say it, but a lot of people aren't willing to live in conjunction with God now, in order to gain that.

To be a Christian is not to be a club member. It's not to join a spa, or it's not a hobby, or it's not a thing you do once for twenty minutes a week on Sunday morning. It's a *whole* life commitment. Everything else has to be secondary. Nothing else can matter. If we can do that, then we can be filled.

So where are you along that continuum of "don't want to be restricted at all" to be completely wanting to spend your whole life trying to serve God and live His way and become like him.

A few years ago – well, it was more than a few now – but for those of you who can remember way back to when Michael Jordan was playing basketball and was reaching the apex of his celebrity – there was a commercial where a little kid wanted to be like Mike. Remember that commercial? That's sort of a tawdry reminder of how we need to be with Jesus Christ and God. We need to idolize Him, not Mike. And we need to put all of our effort into being like him. That's what this beatitude is about. It's what it is telling us.

God is not going to give us that gift. He's not going to fill us up with righteousness unless we really, really want it.

Have you ever given somebody a gift and you realize, as you observe the look on their face, that they didn't have appreciation for the gift that you gave them? I'm not saying that's your fault or their fault. It just sometimes happens, because sometimes we don't know what people value. Giving gifts is always a socially risky business. So it takes some courage to give and receive gifts. With this one, God is not going to take any risks. He's going to make sure we *want* it before He gives it to us. And He's going to *know* that we want it by how much we pursue it. He's going to make sure we want it. He's going to watch us all our lives to see how badly we want it – how much time we put into it, how much effort, how much thought, how much we're willing to sacrifice.

I had a client who was a gymnast. She was just a little girl – thirteen years old. You'd look at her and she just seemed like a regular-looking little teenage girl – kind of tiny. One day she was showing me something on her hand and I noticed how thick her little fingers were from all of that hanging on to those bars. And I saw calluses on the insides of her fingers and on her palms, where she had swung on the bars so much. I was asking her about her workouts. She told me that she went to a gymnastics club five days a week, from three o'clock in the afternoon till seven at night. I said, "Well, what do you do there?" She said, "Well, I practice my skills" – that's the moves that they do in competition – "and I do strength training." I said, "Well, what do you do for strength training?" She said, "Well, I happen to be weak in the upper body, so I do a lot of upper-body strength training on the bars – mostly pullovers and pull-ups and stuff like that." I said, "Oh. How many pull-ups can you do?" She said, "I did twenty-five yesterday." And she's one that's weak in the upper body, right? I said, "Without stopping?" And she said, "Yeah, twenty-five at a time." I was talking to her some more and I learned that she had a detached tendon in her ankle from all the work she's been putting out. I said, "What's that like?" She said, "Well, it doesn't hurt to walk on it, but I have a lot of trouble

running and landing. And I have to really tape it up. But, even then, when I land on it, it hurts.” So I said, “So why do you do all of that?” She said, “Well, I want to see how far I can go and how good I can be. And I’ve been getting a lot better lately. That’s really exciting for me and encouraging. And I know it’s going to be good for me, because I have learned how to keep going, even when I am tired, injured, discouraged or afraid.” I said, “Afraid?” She said, “Yeah, have you ever tried to do a giant? Pretty scary!” You see it on the Olympics. They make it look easy, but it’s very hard. I said, “How do you learn to do those things?” She said, “Well, we have this thing called the pit, and it’s filled up with foam rubber things. So, if you fall off, you go down in it.” She said, “The other day I went in the pit with my head, my coach had to pull me out by my feet.” She fell off of this thing, I guess. I said, “When do you do homework?” “Well, all the rest of the time when I’m not at the gym. There’s not much time for anything else during the week,” she said. “Do you have to stay up late sometimes to get your homework done?” She said, “A lot. I’m tired all the time.” So I said, “With all that work and time that you put in, don’t you miss out on a social life. I mean, that’s what most teenagers your age are really interested in?” She said, “I don’t know many people at school – mostly just the girls at the gym.” “Do you ever wonder if you’re missing out on anything?” She said, “I think mostly I missing out on a lot of drama.” I had to concur there. She said, “Girls my age seem to have a hard time getting along.” So I said, “Don’t you wish you had more social life?” She said, “I know it’s out there, but I can have that or I can have gymnastics, and I have chosen gymnastics.”

So that’s what she’s chosen for herself. That’s what *she* wants to do. God wants us to choose Him. He wants us to put Him first – to desire with our whole heart to be like Him, and to strive with our whole might to be like Him, and to put everything else in second place. If we make that impossible effort, in the end, He says He will give us what we want and He will fill us up with righteousness.

Well, that’s fun to think about and it’s a promise that God has made to us, but in the real world – and I know for myself, sometimes I’ve been so involved in achieving other goals that I have let them get in the way of desire to be like God. But, you know, it really doesn’t have to be like that. Being like God is something we ought to have in the forefront of our mind, but we can also go after other objectives that fit in with that goal. For example, if a person is committed to a career, that’s a good thing. We all need money to live, and it’s always good if we’re good at doing what we make money at. So you have to commit to do that. But it’s also possible, while we do that, to go after it in a godly manner, and so put God first in even those efforts that are important to us. It’s when we start cutting corners and losing out on our principles, that make us godly people, that we suffer.

Okay. Where does the *hunger* come from? When I was in training for the ministry I encountered a man once who told me he wanted to be a Christian, but he said he couldn’t find the burning desire to do it. He said, “I talk to you and other people and I see that you have a burning desire to live a godly life. I don’t.” He said, “I *want* to, but I can’t find it. How did you get that?” Well, I was such a young person, I never thought much about it.

First of all, I wasn't sure I had enough burning desire myself. So that is a good question, though, isn't it? Where does it come from?

Well, God gives it to us, doesn't He? That's where all those things come from. But *how* does He give it to us? Does He wave a magic wand over our head, or doink us on the head with it, and it's there? Well, we all wish that were true, but that's not really what happens, is it? How do we align ourselves to receive it from Him? That might be the question for us. We usually have to do something in order to receive something from God. So how do we align ourselves to receive it?

Well, we saw in the first series on *The Beatitudes* that each one comes out of the previous. So it would all start with the first beatitude, wouldn't it, which is poverty of spirit. That is, essentially, the attitude that we know that, without God, we're helpless in spiritual things – in all things, for that matter. That without His revelation, we would know *nothing* about Him, and we would know *nothing* about the nature of life and how to live it in a way that's pleasing to Him or that's good for us. We would also know, if we're poor in spirit, that we have brought the death penalty on ourselves by our own sins – by our own *unrighteousness*, by our own desire to be free of the law of God. We would also know that we have hurt others because of our ignorance of God's way and the nature of life.

And that would cause us to mourn, wouldn't it, which is the second beatitude. Regret comes as an outgrowth of poverty of spirit. And we mourn our sins, and our actions, and our state of ignorance, and our weakness, and we realize that those things require the death of Jesus Christ so that we can be forgiven of our sins and live with God. So that is reason to mourn. We realize that we've hurt other people, as well as ourselves.

That leads us to the third beatitude, which grows out of that realization that we're weak and that we've done bad things. And that is the attitude of meekness. It says in Romans 3:10:

Rom. 3:10 – *There is no one righteous, not even one. There is no one who understands, no one who seeks God* – and I think that means, seeks God perfectly. *All have turned away. They have together become worthless. There is no one who does good, not even one.*

Okay. So when we start to realize that we are not the only ones who have caused problems, and that we are all together in this as human beings, that changes our attitude toward others. We are willing to cut other people some slack – to become gentle with others, knowing that God has been gentle with us – that we don't have any right to persecute or criticize other people – to get even – because we have done things just as bad to other people. We all need the forgiveness of Jesus Christ and we all caused His death. So we become meek.

Then, once we realize all the suffering that we and other people experience because of our failure, on our part, to follow God's laws and God's way, it's natural to long for the solution, which, according to Paul, is the law in our hearts, which is righteousness.

So there it is. There is the simple four-step plan to arrive at that place that that man was looking for so long ago – how do you hunger and thirst for it? Well, you have to go through the steps. And that is how God gives it to us. He causes things to happen in our lives to help us see what we need to see, and desire what we need to desire, and then do what we need to do. And how He does this is different for each one of us. Yet it follows this same pattern. So, unless we *want* this to happen to us, it won't. We have to be a willing participant in this.

We were talking in our Bible study today about how the human mind does not appreciate the things of God – does not understand them, doesn't value them. It says in 1 Corinthians 2:14:

1 Cor. 2:14 – *The man without the Spirit* – that is, the Holy Spirit – *does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God.* “Those Ten Commandments are too restrictive for me.” There you go. If you said that, you have a ways to go. I've said that before, but it was a long time ago. *For they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.* So a person, without the calling of God – without the influence of the Holy Spirit of God – cannot see or comprehend these things.

I don't mean to belittle people that say that. I was once that way myself, and, from time to time, still fall into it. But there is a difference when the Holy Spirit is influencing our mind and when it is not. I wonder if we understand what an unusual thing it is to find ourselves hungering to be like God – what a *miracle* it is, what a *gift* it is! If you find yourself in possession, don't ever let go of it.

So what can we do to align ourselves and to receive those gifts? When I was a boy in high school, I used to run the two-mile race. And like the little gymnast I was telling you about, I learned lessons that lasted me all my life. I remember the two-mile race. We ran it on track – eight times around. I remember the gun would be fired and we would start the race. We'd all be running as we could jockeying for position before the first turn. Then we would settle into a pace, which was designed to get us to the finish line in the fastest possible time. If you run too fast, you suffer lactic lockup and you can't finish, or you have to go very slowly. So you have to run slow enough that your body can maintain, until you get close enough to the finish line that you can run all out. I remember that after about five laps, with just three to go, I would start to feel an overwhelming sense of fatigue. And yet I knew at exactly that time in the race, I would need to go faster, so that I could close the gap on the front runners. There were a lot of boys who were faster sprinters than I was, and they would always wind up in the front of the pack. So I would have to run faster in the middle to catch up with them as they started to get a little bit tired. So I would be within striking distance as we approached the final straight-away. So the time I needed to move was the time that I felt the most tired. There was one question that would come to my mind when I would get to that point, where it would have been

really easy to just run off the track and rest. And that question was, “How much do you want it?”

That boyhood experience has been good for me all my life. Even Paul said, “Know you not that they which run in a race run all?” You know, the ones that win – once you put aside physical ability and conditioning – it’s the ones that want it the most that win the race. That’s what Paul was saying. You have to run *all*. And that’s what we’re talking about here. Hungering and thirsting means to run the race with everything you have and to want to win.

However, this life is filled with many temptations. It’s filled with many diversions and distractions. And when we are faced with those, we need to ask, “How much do we want it? Which one is more important to us?” In the case of the gymnast, was it girl drama? Or was it a gold medal in gymnastics? Well, she made her choice.

So we have to be mindful of our calling – what a blessing it is, and what a miracle, and how unusual to find ourselves apprehended of God for His purpose! Not everybody gets that in this life. And to have that is a most amazing thing. It should make us wonder, “Why me? Why does this happen to me?”

When we read David’s words, “I would rather have one day in Your courts than a thousand elsewhere,” it’s good to remember these words were a prayer. That’s the second thing that I think we should do. The first thing – I think I forgot to call it by name – was to *be mindful of our calling* and to stay hungry for God’s way. The second one is to *think about and pray about what God has in store for us and what He wants us to do* – to pray about our calling and our goal, and to pray about being like Him and with Him forever. There’s a line in the Lord’s Prayer that says, “Deliver us from temptation.” What is that temptation? Well, that is the temptation of diversion, of slowing down, of quitting, of running off the track, of just giving up, or going on to something else altogether. You can’t run a two-mile race while you wish you were a sprinter. You have to be a long-distance runner to finish that race. You can’t be thinking about how you’d rather be doing the pole vault or the shot put while you’re running a two-mile race. It just doesn’t work. There’s only room in your mind for *one* thing while you’re out on that track. And that’s what God is telling us. So we need to think about those things.

I remember, before a race, I would sit by myself and I would think about how much I wanted to win and what I was willing to do to get it – how much I was willing to hurt myself in order to win. Sometimes that didn’t do much good, but, in a Christian life, it does a lot.

I met a woman sometime back who was depressed. I explained to her that she had suffered many losses in her past after she explained her life to me. She hadn’t grieved those losses yet and all her energy was focused on keeping them out of her conscious awareness. And that lack of energy is expressed as depression. I told her that we could use EMDR to process losses and then her depression would lift. So we had a few sessions, and she cried a lot, and got very sad, and very angry sometimes. I noticed that

she began to come in with a crisis or a story she would tell me every week. Somehow we just weren't getting around to actually doing any EMDR. While it's true that some folks do need to talk about things that are going on, but it began to become a pattern with this lady. It's very hard work. But she was finding it difficult and she was shying away from actually doing what was going to make her feel better.

This can happen to us, too. We can wander afield from the task at hand. We can get distracted, or we can distract ourselves, because it's so hard – what we have to do. What we need to do in those cases is, we need to ask God to keep our hearts on the path and toward life with God, and not to wander off – not to get lost, not to get distracted, or diverted on to another path.

What else can we do? We can study the Bible. The Bible is a story. It's a story from the first verse in the book of Genesis to the last verse in the book of Revelation. It's not two stories. It's all *one* story about what God is doing with us. It's a story of how we have all wandered off from God. But there are examples in the Bible of people who did not wander too far – of people who stayed focused, or regained focus, or who, once called by God, became focused and who did not give up, or distracted, or lose their way. So it's always good to read their stories – to be encouraged and to be reminded that we're not on our own, but we're God's and He is going to help us. Our job is to be like Him so that we can be with Him and not to get lost, but to stay hungry for righteousness.

Whose examples am I talking about? Well, every single one of them that is a positive player in the plan of God – everyone from righteous Abel, all the way to the end of the book, the apostle John, who wrote the book of Revelation. They are all stories about God's people and how He helped them stay hungry.

What else can we do? We've studied three things so far – prayer, study, mindfulness. And I've already mentioned this last one, and that is to *backtrack through the beatitudes*. That's the last thing we can do. If we find ourselves losing the hunger and thirst, what to do is to start with the attitude that starts it all, and go back to poverty of spirit, and march our way through those steps one by one, rebuilding the foundation for a hunger for God – desire to be like God – to hunger for righteousness. Mindful studying and praying and using the blueprint for spiritual growth. Did you catch that – the *blueprint* for spiritual growth? That's what they are.

So when we get lost – when we start losing our way, losing focus, getting distracted, getting tired – the thing to do is to retrace our steps. It makes sense, doesn't it? When you're lost, you go back until you recognize something. Right? So the beatitudes are the steps we need to retrace the path that God leads us down into a relationship with Him. Makes sense to me.

Well, that's skimming the surface of how to hunger for righteousness. We have three more beatitudes. So stay tuned and we'll see you next week for the continuation of this series on *Applying the Beatitudes in Everyday Life*.