



# A HUNGER FOR HEALING

SERIES: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Catalog No. 1082

Matthew 5:6

Fourth Message

Gary Vanderet

September 8, 1996

I spent some time last week with a man who is searching. He is in mid-life, lives in the East Bay, and he is not yet a believer. About six months ago, he visited a church where I spoke on the twenty-third Psalm. In the course of my message, I said that our unfulfilling searches in life reveal our need for God. I quoted Augustine's words, "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Him. We were made for God, and nothing else will do. He is the only end to our search."

This man has spent the first half of his life living like many of us: rushing through college, falling in love, marrying, embarking on a career and the subsequent upward climb, and acquiring possessions to make the journey comfortable. He had played a hard fought first half of life, but now it is half-time and he is in the midst of serious reflection. He doesn't want to play the second half the same way as he did the first. For him, keeping score no longer offers the thrill it once did. He has taken some hits in his job, and he is in a little pain.

I believe that God is stimulating in this man a profound hunger that is nothing less than the answering cry of his heart to God's wooing.

That hunger for healing is the focus of the fourth beatitude of Jesus, to which we come this morning. In this verse, Jesus sets forth both the menu and the appetite that bring spiritual health. By means of a splendidly paradoxical sentence, Jesus lays out what we ought to eat and how we must eat if we are to have spiritual health and ultimate satisfaction. According to Jesus, spiritual health springs from a heart attitude of spiritual hunger. If "poor in spirit" describes our attitude toward ourselves; "mourning" our attitude toward sin; and "meek" our attitude toward others, then hungering and thirsting portray what must be our constant attitude toward God.

Our Lord's words in this beatitude are remarkably intense in that they speak of the strongest of human impulses. But it is hard for us to feel their intensity. After all, if we are thirsty, all we have to do is turn on the tap for cold, refreshing water; if we are hungry, we merely have to go to the refrigerator or drive to the nearest Golden Arches. However, to the average Palestinian, this expression would have spoken loud and clear, because he was never far from the possibility of starvation or dehydration.

This is not a pleasant picture. Jesus is not recom-

mending a polite desire for spiritual nourishment, but a starvation for righteousness. David knew that feeling, as his words in Psalm 63 illustrate: "O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water."

This language is too strong for many of us. It rules out the sleek, self satisfied, half-hearted religion that we know too well. The reason we don't feel a hunger and thirst for God is because we have quenched our dryness by other means, and we have developed strategies to protect us from the pain of unfulfilled longings and deep disappointments. We try and pretend that the pain of life isn't too bad after all.

But all of us are hungry and thirsty. We long for what God has designed for us to enjoy: tension-free relationships filled with deep, loving acceptance, and opportunities to make a difference in someone else's life. We all feel that thirst. It was put there by God! It is part of the dignity of our humanity being made in the image of God. We long for a quality of relationship and meaning that no other creature has the capacity to enjoy.

But we are also unbelievably foolish, in that we move in wrong directions in response to our thirst. The Israelites would not trust God to assuage their thirst. The prophet Jeremiah described their problem, and ours, too, when God looked deeply into the hearts of his people during a time when they were slipping far away from him. God is speaking: "My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water" (2:13).

They had rejected the fresh running supply of God and his grace, the inexhaustible reserves of his life and power, choosing instead the stagnant waters of cracked cisterns which they themselves had built. We are no different. We are determined to satisfy the longings of our hearts by taking a shovel, looking for a likely spot, and digging for whatever fulfillment we can find. We want to run our own lives.

The Scriptures consistently expose man as being both thirsty and foolish. We long for the satisfaction we were created to enjoy, but we move away from God to find it. If we could look inside our hearts this morning, many of us would uncover those two elements: hunger and thirst, deep longings for what we don't have, and stub-

born independence that is reflected in our wrong strategies for finding the life we desire. The longings reveal our *dignity*; the foolish strategies, our *depravity*.

**“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled”** (Matt 5:6, NIV).

Every one of us should ask ourselves from time to time, What am I hungering for? Is it power, money, a better house, nicer clothes, a bigger car, a better husband or wife, acceptance and love from someone who doesn't accept me?

If our hungers are misdirected, then we will never be satisfied. Looking for love from another person is a bottomless pit. No one can fill that void. There is nothing that can satisfy us if we hunger for the wrong things; we will just want more of the same. But Jesus says that if we hunger and thirst after righteousness, then we will be filled.

That is what he told his disciples too, in John 6:

**“Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man shall give to you, for on Him the Father, even God, has set His seal.”** (John 6:27, NASB)

There are only two kinds of bread: that which lasts and that which doesn't. According to Jesus, it is far better to work for the bread that endures. The problem with most of us, however, is that we are working for the kind of bread which doesn't last—crusts which temporarily fills us but eventually leave us unsatisfied again. Jesus reveals that the problem is not that we work for bread (because we all have to earn a living in order to eat), it is that bread doesn't last very long. It does not satisfy in the end, so it is a bad investment.

Jesus' words reveal a major flaw in our lifestyles: We spend all of our energies working for bread, only to find that it doesn't satisfy. When we're young, all we can think about is getting a hot car, developing a strong, healthy body, or some other trivial pursuit. As we get older, we dedicate our energies to striving for economic independence, owning the perfect house or some other possession that will make life more satisfying.

Many people feel that the most important thing in life is to be healthy and economically sufficient. That is why they go to work every day. As the Presidential election approaches, candidates are being evaluated, not on their integrity or character, or what they propose to do about improving the moral conditions of our nation, but on what they will do about the economy. That is the bottom line: what is going to happen to our living conditions?

The philosophy of many (including some Christians) is described in the little jingle:

Into this world to eat and to sleep,  
And to know no reason why he was born,

Save to consume the corn,  
Devour the cattle, flock and fish,  
And leave behind an empty dish.

Jesus challenges that way of thinking. His words force us to ask ourselves, What are we working for? Is everything we do merely preparation for the weekend? The thing that makes us different from animals is that having a full belly and a comfortable place to sleep does not satisfy us. It is an unwise investment to put all our energy into that which will not pay off.

Years ago, I used to watch the Jack Benny show, and I remember a dialogue between Jack and his servant Rochester. Jack had a vault in which he kept all his money, and now and then he would open it (you couldn't see it, but you could hear all the locks and chains being opened). Rochester would yell out, “But Mr. Benny, you can't take it with you!” Jack would yell back, “Then I'm not going!” He was wrong, of course. We are all going—and the hearse will not be towing any U-Haul trailers. We leave it all behind for someone else.

Jesus says we are to seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these other things will be added.

Now I have no problem knowing what “righteousness” is; no one has to tell me what it means to be a righteous man. My problem is *becoming* a righteous man. I need help to do that. The righteousness that we are to seek is that beauty of character and conduct which pleases God. And what Jesus promises here is that if we pursue that, that is all he asks. If we hunger and thirst after righteousness, God will satisfy that desire. God sees more than our performance: He sees the intent of our hearts. That is why he loved David. If we were to judge David by his performance, we would say he was a failure. But God saw that David sought him and longed to be a godly man.

Even a casual glance at the New Testament reveals that Jesus had a difficult time with the Pharisees, the clergy of his day. He called them hypocrites, because they were outwardly correct but inwardly corrupt. They preached decency, but their hearts were defiled. Their rules could not correct the state of their own hearts, nor could they correct others. Jesus goes on after the beatitudes to contrast Christian righteousness with Pharisaic righteousness. The latter was an external conformity to rules; the former is an inner righteousness of heart, mind and motive. This is what we should hunger and thirst for.

There are a lot Pharisees around still. They work hard, they seem upright, but they are very uptight. Goodness for them is a demanding business. They're chaste, honest, sober, respectable, Bible-toting, church-going people, but everything seems out of step. As one man put it, “their faith exists as a dull habit.” They have an appearance of righteousness, with its self-imposed

worship and discipline, but they lack the love that springs from contact with God.

Credo and rites and rituals cannot modify our behavior. Neither will admonishments to read our Bible more, pray more or go to church more often. The problem with rules and regulations is that they have no mechanism for overriding our natural tendencies to go wrong. All they can do is reveal them and say to us: "You should!" "You shouldn't!" "You can't!"—and the rest is up to us. But that's the problem.

Goodness is a job for God! We must stop horning in on his business and ask him to bring about change in us. "To those who are far from righteousness," God says, "I will bring my righteousness near" (Isa 46:12).

Righteousness requires effort and discipline, but it cannot be reduced to a rigorous technique. It involves making the effort to stay close to Christ and listening to his voice. As we draw close to him, walking with him, talking to him, listening to his words, relying on him, and asking for his help, his character begins to rub off on us. It's not what we are, but what we want to be that matters.

In order to accomplish this, we need our appetites stimulated. As David discovered, we will not really feel the hunger and thirst that Jesus is referring to until we experience a wilderness. Richard Foster says: "God becomes a reality when he becomes a necessity." I know from my own experiences and those of many who have shared their suffering with me, that oftentimes it is pain that detaches us from the idolatries that rob us of joy. Pain is God's way of prying our fingers away from the things that are false and will not satisfy. Pain pulls us away from lesser loves and enlarges our intimacy with our Heavenly Father, bringing us peace and unimaginable joy.

When David was anointed by Samuel, the prophet whispered into his ear, "You shall be the next king." Very soon afterwards, David defeated Goliath in a magnificent display of faith. But where do we find David following his victory? In the wilderness! Hunted by a mad king, he could not fight back. Even when it was in his power to get revenge, he could not, because he knew that he had to trust God as he prepared for kingship.

In that wilderness, David poured out his heart to God. More than fifty of the psalms record his lamenting. In his tears and anguish, he learned to trust in God. In the wilderness, he learned that his own resources were not enough. In the wilderness, he learned to say, "He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside still waters." David discovered that God could transform a wilderness into a green pasture.

It is in a wilderness that we discover the supernatural provision of God.

The nation of Israel would learn this. After they were brought out of the Egyptian captivity, and victoriously come through the Red Sea, their enemies destroyed, where do we find them? In the Promised Land? No! In a wilderness. Why did they not immediately enter the land? Here is what Moses told them, in Deuteronomy 8:2-3:

**"And you shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. And he humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna [supernatural food] which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord."**

This was also true of our Lord. What happened after his baptism and assurance that he was God's beloved Son? Where do we find him? Sitting on a throne, ruling his kingdom? No! The Spirit immediately led him into a wilderness. As Jesus was preparing to be king over his people, he was led to a desert where he had to trust his Father while he hungered and thirsted for forty days. After that time, angels ministered to him and provided him with supernatural food.

There is a hunger in the human heart which nothing but God can satisfy, and a thirst that no one but he can quench.

Our discomfort is God's doing. He hounds us. He hems us in. He thwarts our dreams. He foils our best laid plans. He frustrates our hopes. He waits until we know that nothing will ease our pain, nothing will make life worth living except his presence.

This is what makes us thirsty for God.

David Roper describes these times in his book *Seeing Through*:

*Times in the wilderness.* Dark days. Days of weakness and shame. Being disregarded, misunderstood, criticized, and accused. Living with hurtful gestures and critical words. The death of our dreams, for ourselves, our marriages, our children. Waiting in lonely isolation, with hope deferred, without promised togetherness or companionship, and with no end of waiting in sight.

*Seasons of obscurity.* Dreary duty that no one sees or applauds. Being unknown, uncelebrated, unnoticed and unimportant. This is what delivers us from the need of "man's empty praise" so we can be satisfied with God's "well done" alone.

*Times of great temptation.* Satan tries to sift us like wheat. They humble us and purify us, and teach us

pray.

*Times of disappointment and debilitating discouragement.* Regret, struggle, failure. The agony of spent vice and self-indulgence. Times of failure where we learn that our wills are incapable of keeping us from sin.

*Times of learning to do without.* Without love, beauty, money, marriage, or health. Being stripped of friends, father, mother, brother, reputation.

Slowly, steadily, God strips us of all our longings, leaving us with nothing but a desire for him alone. It is then that we can say, with the psalmist, "Whom have I in heaven but you? And being with you I desire nothing on earth" (Ps 73:25).

Samuel Rutherford explained it in this way in an essay in the seventeenth century:

If God had told me some time ago that he was about to make me as happy as I could be in this world, and then had told me that he should begin by crippling me in arm or limb, and removing me from all my usual sources of enjoyment, I should have thought it a very strange mode of accomplishing his purpose. And yet, how is his wisdom manifest even in this! For if you should see a man shut up in a closed room, idolizing a set of lamps and rejoicing in their light, and you wished to make him truly happy, you would begin by blowing out all his lamps and then throw open the shutters to let in the light of heaven.

Jesus said:

**"Do not work for the food that spoils, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you...I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty"** (John 6:27, 35).

Malcolm Muggeridge expresses this thought in his confession:

I may, I suppose, regard myself as being a relatively successful man. People occasionally look at me on the street. That's fame. I can fairly easily earn enough to qualify for the highest slopes of inland revenue. That's success. Furnished with money and a little fame, even the elderly, if they care to, can partake of trendy diversions. That's pleasure. It might happen once in a while that something I said or wrote was sufficiently heeded to persuade myself that it represented a serious impact on our time. That's fulfillment. Yet I say to you, and I beg of you to believe me, multiply those tiny triumphs by a million, add them all together, and they are nothing, less than nothing, a positive impediment, measured against one drink of that living water that is offered to the spiritually hungry.

*"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled."*

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