



---

# Blessed Are Those Who Hunger For Righteousness

SCRIPTURE:  
Matthew 5:2-7

---

March 7, 2021 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

---

**B**lessed are the poor in Spirit, those who know they need God. Blessed are those who mourn, those whose lives are defined by love of God and love of neighbor and grieve the pain and injury that is so much a part of this world. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Righteousness is not pursued very often in contemporary America. It seems to me that we have lost our hunger for righteousness. That means it's all the more important for communities of faith to pursue a diet of righteousness.

Years ago, we took a trip to see the Grand Canyon. We asked around and found a trail less traveled and hiked down. We ate a sandwich and then hiked back up. The only thing that would have made the trip better is if we'd taken enough water to drink. We didn't. By the time we returned, I was so thirsty I was beginning to get a headache. The thing about hunger and thirst is they are first-tier needs. When we are hungry or thirsty, other concerns can be postponed easily. Hunger and thirst are your first concern.

Jesus says the truly blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. So, what does it mean—to thirst for righteousness? For righteousness to be your first desire?

Let me offer a couple of reflections. The first is to recognize that things, as they are, are not right. Did you hear the message on mourning? We talked about this spiritual reality in that sermon. To hunger for righteousness, we need to recognize that things in us and things in the world are not as they should be, not as they could be, not as God desires them to be.

But we don't always want what God wants. It's a pretty high bar. I think we at least want to want what God wants. When we do, we hunger for things

to be different.

I have recently enjoyed Jon Meacham's book, *His Truth Is Marching On*. It is a biography of John Lewis. When Lewis died last summer, we lost someone who I believe embodied this Beatitude.

Meacham says there was a moment during the Civil Rights movement when the Freedom Riders were crossing the south. The buses had reached Alabama and there, the threats of violence, even death, were expected. President Kennedy and Attorney General Robert Kennedy sent emissaries to meet with the Freedom Riders to convince them to stop the ride. It was too dangerous. The Freedom Riders agreed. They stopped the buses.

But John Lewis had other ideas. He went to Alabama to renew the rides. He knew the risks. But Lewis, Diane Nash, and others drove through the night to get to the buses, and they headed out. Meacham said, "They weren't thinking pragmatically or even rationally, for their thought was shaped not by the fears of the world they knew but by the hopes of the one they were seeking."<sup>1</sup>

They were living toward God's promised day, no matter the costs, with thoughts shaped less by fears of the world they knew and more by hopes of the one they were seeking. That's what it looks like to hunger and thirst for righteousness—to want the wrongs in the world to be set right.

It's a high bar, like I said. Not one I live up to very often. In this season of Lent, we reflect on discipleship, on what it might mean to live a blessed life. We don't do this to point out our weaknesses; that's not really the point. The point is inspiration; to look at lives of goodness, to see that it might inspire greater goodness in us.

Viktor Frankl was a psychotherapist who did some

---

1 Jon Meacham, *His Truth Is Marching On* (2020), p. 97-98.

amazing work after he survived several Nazi prison camps. He once said, “Decent people are a minority in history, but they inspire us to the greatness of decency.”<sup>2</sup> I think Frankl has an important insight.

You know, none of us is decent or faithful all the time. We all stumble. But when Jesus gives his life to teach us of the kingdom of heaven, he is inviting us not to be defined by our failings, but by his grace, and to be inspired by the decency we see in the world. To hunger for righteousness.

Righteousness is an important word in our faith. To be righteous is, obviously enough, to pursue what is right. That is hard, important work. To pursue what is right.

But it’s more than that. Righteousness... this is something we have talked about several times in recent years. Righteousness is more than simply wanting things to be made right. It is the difficult discipline of seeking the right. But righteousness is a term that describes less our position on the issues, and more our relationships. Theologically, to be righteous is to be in right relationship with God and with neighbor.

That’s why I say the pursuit of righteousness is not very popular in our culture. What is preferred now is to claim to be right on the issues and to discount those on the other side of the issue of the day—maybe to dehumanize them.

In Wendell Berry’s novel, *Jayber Crow*, Jayber lives in Port William, Kentucky. It’s an old farming community living through the pains and indignities of becoming a new farming community.

Jayber was an orphan who considered ministry while at the orphanage, but cast that aside to become a barber, a church sexton, and a gravedigger. He never married, but he did love Maggie. Sadly for Jayber, Maggie was married to Troy. It was an ill-suited relationship. Troy was arrogant and selfish and Jayber didn’t like him at all.

It was the 1960s and the Vietnam War was raging. Protesters filled the streets. Most folks in Port William considered the war protestors to be un-American, if not outright communist. Troy thought that, and while waiting his turn to get his haircut, he said, “Well, if you ask me, they should just gather all those protestors up and put them in front of the Vietnamese and whoever kills who, it would all be to the good.”

Jayber said, “Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.” Troy whipped his head around and said, “Where did you get that?” Jayber said, “Jesus.” “Oh,” Troy said.

Then Jayber thinks to himself, “It would have been a great moment in the history of Christianity, except I did not love Troy.”<sup>3</sup>

That’s righteousness. It’s not enough to be right; we have to be in right relationship.

There is very little appetite for righteousness these days. It is so tempting to settle for being right and divided, for being right and isolated, for being right and even filled with condescension. Hunger for righteousness is an acquired taste.

But it’s what will restore community. That may seem naive to you, but Jesus says it’s blessed. I think he’s right.

---

2 Viktor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning* (1946), p. 145.

3 Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow* (2000), p. 287.