

## **A Hunger for God** *Matthew 6:1-18*

### **Introduction**

Our world is hungry, and what I mean by world is people. The world is hungry for happiness, it is hungry for satisfaction, it is hungry for new experiences, it is hungry for pleasure. People move from one relationship to another thinking that will satisfy. They move from one job to another hoping that it will help bring them closer to financial freedom with the thought that it will bring the satisfaction they long for. People make decisions motivated by a desire for peace or happiness with the hope to be satisfied and what is experienced every single time is the same problem.

As you recall from the beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said that the way to be satisfied is through a hunger and thirsting for righteousness that can only be satisfied through Jesus. But what does the life of a person look like whose hunger for righteousness is satisfied by Jesus? Is it quiet? Is it hidden? Is it something so personal that you just don't share how Jesus is satisfying to you?

I watched a video this week on YouTube featuring an interview between Sneako (Nico Kenn De Balinthazy) and Adam 22 (Adam John Grandmaison) of them recording a podcast. Both men are podcasters and YouTubers who are very popular; Adam 22 is an outspoken Atheist who grew up in what he identifies as a Christian home. He believes the notion of God is foolish and believes it is a waste of time, there is nothing good about religion, and that the belief in God is stupid. In the interview with Adam 22, Sneako suggested that there has to be some place for a notion of God to which Adam responded: "If God is real, it should be the most important thing in your life. If he were real, I would spend all of my time trying to get closer to figuring out what God wanted for me." In other words, if God is real, then instead of being passive or lackadaisical about it, you must go all in with your whole being.

What I find interesting about Adam's statement is that, as an outsider of the Christian faith, he seems to suggest that it makes less sense that people who say they believe in God have little to show for that belief in the way they live their lives. Jesus seems to affirm the same thing in his sermon so far, but then when we come to Matthew 6, it sounds like Jesus is taking an about-face regarding what he said earlier:

**You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.**  
(Matthew 5:13-16)

How can the Christian be salt of the earth that has not lost its saltiness and light that shines on a hill to be seen, and not be seen at the same time? Consider Jesus' words compared to what he said earlier in his sermon: **“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven”** (Matt. 6:1).

The three pillars of ancient Judaism include the giving of alms, prayer, and fasting. At the heart of these three pillars was three-fold: The giving of alms should be the motive to live generously as one who understands that all that he owns belongs to God and such a person should look for ways to bless others as he himself had been blessed. Secondly, the one who prays to Yahweh is the one who has a relationship with him and that prayer is the expression of a real relationship with the living God. Third, fasting is the practice of refraining from food or other things for the purpose of focusing one's attention on God as a person's greatest need in the absence of the thing the person is fasting from. Food is the most common thing people fast from because every time we eat food, we are reminded that we need something outside of ourselves to live.

In light of what we learned from the Sermon on the Mount and the behavior of the scribes and Pharisees; it seems that Jesus continues to call out their hypocrisy. In Matthew 23:23-26, Jesus not only used strong language to warn others of the kind of hypocrisy some of the religious leaders were guilty of, but his words serve as a warning to us all:

**Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean.**

**Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.** (Matthew 23:25-28)

We get the word hypocrite from the Greek word *hupocritēs* which originally referred to a play-actor who participated on stage in ancient Greece and Rome. An actor is someone who pretends to be someone that they are not. And like today, play-actors aspired celebrity status, awards, and recognition for their ability to pretend so well to be a character they really were not. In Matthew 6, Jesus is warning his followers to not fall into the same trap that so many religious people fall into in pretending to be something they really are not. This is a danger we all face. How many times have we pretended before others or while together in our gatherings at church?

It seems that there were some, most likely the scribes and pharisees, who gave to the needy and then announced it, prayed elaborate prayers to impress others, and fasted in a way that it was impossible for people to not know. They were play-actors and their audience was anyone who would notice.

As I studied Matthew 6:1-18, I was struck again by how brilliant Jesus' sermon really is. Each section in the Sermon on the Mount builds upon the one that preceded it. All of the sermon builds upon a single theme, and that is the kind of life expected of the one whose citizenship is in

the Kingdom of God. So here is what I see in this passage: The religious leaders practiced the three pillars of their Hebraic roots of giving to the needy, praying to God, and fasting to focus on God instead of what they have given up. The righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was a performance to be seen by an audience of many. So, what is it that sets the Christian apart from the scribes and Pharisees? Here it is:

1. The Christian is poor in spirit because he understands he is in no position to give to God but only able to receive unmerited and undeserved grace.
2. The Christian is one whose grief over his sin compels him to look to God as the only remedy for his sin.
3. The Christian yields to the will of God because an all-satisfying God who lacks nothing compels him to do so.

Okay, so follow the logic in Jesus' sermon at the risk of me sounding redundant: Those who are poor in spirit, who mourn, and are meek, are all adjectives that a person must experience on some level if he or she will ever be willing to come to the cross of Jesus Christ to be forgiven of their sins and to be reconciled to God. Only then, will a person develop the spiritual appetite of hungering and thirsting for the kind of righteousness that only Jesus can satisfy. This is not only the way your righteousness is able to surpass that of the scribes and pharisees before God, but it is also a righteousness that is transforming you and sets you apart from religious play-actors like the scribes and Pharisees.

### **The Poor in Spirit Give**

Jesus said, "**When you give to the needy...**" no one needs to know. Think about why a person might be compelled to let others know why and how much he or she gives to others? Is it not because that person wants others to think better of him? Why on earth would anyone want others to think better of them? I will tell you why, it is because of pride. The only reason we want others to think better of us is because it is our glory that is of primary concern. This is the root of hypocrisy and the reality is that the kind of generosity that is motivated by pride is only a mask. It is like the makeup used in a morgue to disguise the obvious. "What is the obvious?" you ask. The obvious is that no matter how much makeup a highly skilled mortician may use, the person in the casket is still dead.

Those who are poor in spirit and have received the riches of God's immeasurable grace through Jesus Christ should not be concerned about what others may think of him or her because what really matters is what God thinks of the Christian. Think about it, what is it dear brother or sister that compelled you to come to Jesus in the first place? It wasn't what people thought of you that drove you to the cross, but your desire to be reconciled to a holy God whose standard of righteousness you could never meet on your own. Here is who you once were according to Colossians 1:21-22, "**And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him...**" (Colossians 1:21-22). This is why I like the wise advice that C.H. Spurgeon gave for when you are offended by another person: "If any man thinks ill of you, do not be angry with him, for you are worse than he thinks you to be."

So, when the poor in spirit give, they do so out of the awareness of how much God has given to him or her. When the poor in spirit give to the poor, it has more to do with a love for a benevolent God that is creating a desire to express that love to the poor. The Christian is a person who is always aware that he or she lives in the presence of God, and what that audience of One thinks is the only thing that really matters.

### **Those Who Mourn Seek God**

The hypocrite prays in a way to impress others, but the Christian prays out of a great need for him. Jesus is not forbidding public prayer, for there are examples of public prayers by faithful men and women throughout the Bible (see 1 Kings 18:36-40; Ezra 9:1-10:5; Acts 4:23-41; 20:36-38; 21:5-6). Charles Spurgeon said that, "True prayer is neither a mere mental exercise nor a vocal performance. It is far deeper than that - it is spiritual transaction with the Creator of Heaven and Earth." For the Christian, prayer is a conversation with the God who always meets him where he is, but will never leave him where he is at.

The Old Testament Prophet, Habakkuk, prayed: "***Lord, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, Lord. Repeat them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy***" (Habakkuk 3:1-2, NIV). Habakkuk's prayer was one where he went to the God who alone is able to do what we are unable to do.

Think for a moment about the reasons why Habakkuk prayed: He prayed because he heard of God's reputation. He heard of the God who spoke galaxies into being (Gen. 1:1). He heard of how God delivered the Hebrews through the Red Sea (Exod. 14). Habakkuk heard about the wall of Jericho falling (Josh. 6). He heard about how Samson struck down one thousand Philistines with only the jawbone of a donkey, because God was with him (Jud. 15). Habakkuk grew up hearing about exploits of King David and how he brought back the Ark of the Covenant after defeating the Philistines. Habakkuk also heard how Uzzah died when he tried to keep the ark from falling into the dirt, even though he was told that no unclean person was permitted to touch the ark or lest that person die. Habakkuk understood that Uzzah was arrogant to believe that his hand was cleaner than the dirt of the ground. Habakkuk prayed because he understood who he was in light of who God is.

Like Habakkuk, those whose mourning over their sin that led them to the cross where Jesus died for sinners, pray because they understand their great need for a God that Christians can now call "Father." Jesus then gives us a model for how to pray that we will begin to unpack next Sunday.

### **The Meek Hunger for God**

Finally, Jesus warns about fasting to get the attention of others. I picture the person he is speaking about as one who postures themselves as voluntarily suffering for God so that others will think highly of them. This type of person puts on a mask of misery so that others will ask why he or she looks so terrible; I'm sure you can imagine the response of that person: "Oh, I am fine, I'm just more hungry than usual...". The reward for those who act this way to draw attention to themselves is the applause of men instead of the approval of God.

Think for a moment about the purpose of fasting. When you fast from something like food, you are forced to be always mindful of why you are fasting in the first place. Fasting, as I said

earlier, is a good practice for the purpose of continued and unrelenting prayer. Each rumbling of the stomach as you do so, serves to remind you that in order to live, we need something we must consume to nourish our body. In the same way, we need God. He is our everything! He is our wisdom, he is our salvation, he is our joy, he is our satisfaction, is our water that quenches every thirst and our bread that satisfies our hungry soul. We fast for an audience of One because we are hungry for him and him alone!

### **Conclusion**

This is how, my dear brothers and sisters who follow Jesus, your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and the pharisees. And this is how you can be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect. We give because we have received. We seek God in prayer because he alone can meet our needs. We fast because we hunger for the one who **“called us out of darkness into his marvelous light”** (1 Pet. 2:9).

Every act, every decision, every act of piety, along with every motive that shapes our decisions is before an audience of One. We do not live to please men; we live to please him. On the Day of judgment, we will stand before God and no one else, and Jesus will say one of two things: **“Come you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”** Or you will hear: **“Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels”** (see Matt. 7:21-23; 25:31-46).