

Title: Kingdom Character and Conduct in a Nutshell

Text(s): Matthew 5:6; Psalm 37

Biblical Basic: Single-mindedness | I focus on God and His priorities for my life.
Matthew 6:33

Sermon in a Sentence: Kingdom righteousness begins with right character, is motivated by right loving, and is expressed in right-setting activity.

Create Interest:

6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the poor in spirit. The ones who have come to end of the rope. The ones who have nowhere else to turn. Those who are experiencing the worst life has to offer, who are struggling to face the world, to even come out of their house, to make it to work or school. We, my friends, we will be blessed - we will be . We are the ones for whom Jesus came to announce the Kingdom. It's not just for those who have it all together. In fact, it is especially for us. That's why Jesus says it's such good news. We're not left out. It's ok that our insides are falling apart, that we are emotionally and spiritually depleted. We're the ones who need it most. We are seen by God, recognized, brought to his loving attention. Jesus says we're the ones who see the Kingdom - for whom the Kingdom is revealed. Why is that? How is it in the midst of pain and loss, when our spirit is crushed, that we get into the Kingdom? I'll tell you why. The Kingdom of God is where

God is at work on behalf of His people. Those who cry out to Him will be heard. He will come to our side, to our hearts, to our lives and once again. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done. The Kingdom is where His will is being done - on earth as in heaven. And this good, good Father has a vision for what His people should experience - what he wills for their life. He's in the business of setting things right - and he wants to set your heart and life right too.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. See what I mean? Broken-hearted? Poor in spirit? Emotionally and spiritually bankrupt? Mourning the loss of your sister? Jesus says, we'll be comforted. This is no cold and calculated conversation about who is in and who is out. This is a God that starts his blessing promises off to the ones who've hit bottom. To the ones who aren't sure they can take it or make it. There are loving arms - not judging fists. This is the almighty creator saying He sees and feels and experiences your pain and suffering with you. He will not leave you or forsake you. This is when you need him most - when you're hurting, when you're spent, when you're low or even lowly. Why? Because God is in the business of setting things right - of not sitting idly by when His people need Him most. His compassionate heart is moved into action. Comfort. That's what I need. That's what my broken heart needs, my mourning heart, my loss of life heart.

Blessed are the Humble? Meek? I'm so humbled. I can't stop the cause of my suffering. It's out of my hands. I can't seem to even control the emotions. Humbled? Oh yes, I'm humbled. I'm the one that always has a 7 point strategy for taking life by the horns and subduing it to my own idealized self mastery. With the right morning routine, a well orchestrated digital planner, and just the right amount of sleep, nutrition, and exercise, life should bow at my feet and

cater to my every strategic plan. Morning routine? How about a mourning routine? That's m-o-u - mourning routine. But I can't do anything about this - I can't stop the death of a cherished loved one - I can't stop a recession from ruining my business - I can't control the selfish lives of the people that have it out for me - I can't hold back the emotional flood of feelings - I am overwhelmed - overtaken - undone. Humbled? Do I realize how powerless I am? Count me in, God. If the humbled will be blessed in your kingdom, then it's official. Go ahead and stamp my visa for Kingdom access. I've moved off the throne, I'm ready for your rule. My life is in your hands. That's the only way this is ever going to work.

And what we see in these first three beatitudes is a longing for things to be set right. A recognition that things in our hearts or in our lives or in our world are not as they should be, not as God wants them to be, and we long for them to be put to rights. We need it, to be sure. But we get to the place where we desperately want it. We long for it.

And I think, as big as this subject may be, that this is what Jesus means when he says His disciples will be blessed when they hunger and thirst for righteousness. This fourth beatitude is potentially a culmination of the first three. It brings them into focus. It gives us clarity about what should replace everything that is wrong in our lives and in our world. What replaces our broken heartedness or how are we comforted? What fills our spiritual poverty? The answer is that God does right by us. He does the right thing for us. His character is right toward us.

Blessed are those that hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Now, this word righteousness is a very familiar word for us church goers. So

familiar that we may take its meaning for granted. Or we may have a shallow understanding of such a complex word. Let's talk about it for a few moments.

There are potentially **four** aspects of righteousness for which a disciple should hunger and thirst¹.

First is our pursuit of **personal righteousness**. Our lesson last week dealt with the beginning steps in this process - that we recognize our disoriented living, our spiritual poverty. When we are truly honest and see how far we've missed the mark, that often leads to a mourning over the chaos and destruction our selfishness has led to. That brings us to a place where we humble ourselves before the Lord - we become a submitted servant to the Lord, reorienting our character and behavior to align with what God expects from us.

We have a major part to play in this process, but we also know that God is at work, bringing about a cleansing and renewing of our hearts and minds. This is what is known as sanctification. It is related to the pursuit of holiness. But where we might simply say that **holiness describes the absence of sin, righteousness is what sin is replaced with**. So holiness and righteousness are related, but they are not the same thing.

Sin is wrong behavior that contributes to the brokenness of our own lives, the lives of others, and ultimately the brokenness in the world. We're the ones doing this wrong behavior, causing the brokenness. No one is making us do it. We may be tempted by the enemy, but we're the ones who are behaving badly. And so, if we're capable of behaving badly of our own will, then it stands to reason that we

¹ Daniel M. Doriani. The Sermon of the Mount. 22-23

can also choose to behave rightly. Righteousness, then, in this sense of the word, is our right behavior that sets things right in our own lives, the lives of others, and ultimately contributes to the right-setting of society and the world. Which leads us to our next biblical understanding of righteousness.

Secondly, apprentices to Jesus should long for **social righteousness**. When we look at the world through the eyes of our leader and King, we see that things are not the way they should be and we are compelled to engage in setting things right. You've got to get this church. We are not individualists. We are not isolationists. We are not brought out of darkness into his light simply for our own sake. We are to partner with God in his work of right-setting in the world. This includes all the spheres of influence to which God gives us: our families, our workplace, education, politics, the arts, our communities. In this way, **righteousness is seeing the broken world the way God sees it and being compelled to do something about it.**

Now there is also what theologians call **alien righteousness**. Who knew that ET could get saved? Actually, Paul contributes to this more than any other New Testament writer. While, as we will see this morning, righteousness is the goal to which Christ calls his apprentices, the challenge is that in our current human form, we will almost always fall short. As such, through another theological idea called justification, our faith and allegiance to Christ gives us a right standing before the Father in the courtroom of his judgement. In other words, **the righteousness of Jesus makes us "right" as well.** That's good news, amen? So, alien righteousness - a righteousness from outside of us that is still counted as our own righteousness.

Now the fourth longing for **righteousness** is similar to the second in that we long for the day when Jesus returns and reconciles all things back to himself - when everything is finally and eternally set right - when He truly makes all things new. It [eternal righteousness; consummated righteousness?] is the final completion of the all the other three kinds of righteousness.

Now, the way Jesus uses righteousness in the sermon, and really throughout the Gospels, is more related to the first and second kinds of righteousness - personal and social righteousness. So when he says we should hunger and thirst for righteousness, keep that in mind. I know for a fact that this is one of those tension points among Christians. Paul's emphasis on our right-standing before the righteous Judge because of Christ's redemptive work, what we called alien righteousness, tends to be the dominant concept for the word in the minds of some believers. Therefore, whenever the word is used, we may tend to think of that meaning. But every way Jesus talks about it in the sermon is in one way or another related to our personal character and conduct. He's laying out a framework for how we are to live and act. How to BE a kingdom citizen.

Righteousness (as it is used in the Sermon on the Mount) is **living out God's ideal for Kingdom character and conduct** and without question, as I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, this multifaceted concept is the underlying theme of the Sermon. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" he says. "Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness," he says. He even says, "You're blessed when you are persecuted for righteousness' sake."

Whether things are settled for you personally for all of eternity through alien righteousness is not Jesus' point here. He's teaching us a lesson on what we

should be doing, how we should be behaving, the kind of character we should exhibit in the here and now. What is your goal for this life? What should you be longing for - hungering for - thirsting for? Clearly, he says righteousness is the goal. But what does he really mean by that? Well, let's keep digging and figure that out. How about we start with this:

Righteousness is a one word description of who God is and thus, what he does. And by looking at it from that perspective, we don't have to guess at what Jesus means when he says his apprentices should hunger and thirst for righteousness, for God the father himself embodies it in His loving character and conduct. Here's a 2 minute background on the righteousness of God reflected in the Old Testament - the **understanding** that Jesus and the people listening to him would have had at the time of the Sermon on the Mount.

First of all, **Yaweh** is righteous: He speaks and acts according to the purity of his own nature. Additionally, because of the special relationship He had with His people Israel, He acted in agreement with his covenant with them. So Yahweh is righteous in his character and conduct to his covenant people.

Likewise, the Old Testament Jews understood that **God's** covenant people are called to live righteously - in conformity to God's will. God lays that out for them in what we know as The Law. Yet prophets and poets like Hosea and David would tie righteousness to mercy, loving kindness, and justice. You see, the people of God are to reflect the righteousness of God. So to make it even more clear, God's intention was not just rule-keeping, though he certainly laid out parameters of conduct within the law that reflect righteousness. But rather, **righteousness** is living as a reflection of God's loving heart. This is what He

wanted them to see. It's what he wants us to see as well. Read Isaiah 58 if you want to see the difference between religious rule-keeping and what God is really looking for in our hearts.

And so into this context of history and understanding, Jesus comes teaching about Kingdom righteousness. He too, as the King and Messiah, is the righteous one. He is the one who sets things right. The Kingdom and salvation of God are in Him and come through Him. And, as we see here in the Sermon on the Mount as a prime example, he also lays out for us the parameters that Kingdom citizens live by to be a reflection of the righteous King. It's what we call the new covenant available to all people. Those who are Kingdom citizens are taught about the new and right way of thinking, feeling, speaking, and behavior and are fully expected to pursue it. And in fact, as we are studying today, Jesus says we should hunger and thirst for it.

Hunger and thirst suggests a kind of desperateness - a craving and longing for things to be different - not just personally, though that is certainly included, but also in the world. I believe Jesus is calling us to a passionate pursuit of right setting in the world. Kingdom righteousness begins with right character, is motivated by right loving, and is expressed in right-setting activity. That's the best definition I can come up with for the kind of Kingdom righteousness that Jesus is talking about here. So let's break that down a moment. Let's talk about...

Right character. If you hunger and thirst for righteousness, don't start with right behavior, start with right character. That's the problem the Pharisees were plagued with. They were only focused on religious activities. You see, **character is the outflow of the inner person that the world sees.** How would your family

describe your character? How about your co-workers? Listen church, righteousness begins within. Right acting flows from a right heart. If you want to change your character, you'll need to work on your heart. We'll talk more about this next week when we talk about "the pure in heart."

Let's look at how James shows this process of how right character comes first:

James 3:16-18 CSB

16 For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there is disorder and every evil practice. (Notice what comes first: envy and selfish ambition. Those are internal issues that define your character. Disorder and evil practices follow. So what should be in it's place?) 17 But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peace-loving, gentle, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without pretense. (And look at this:) 18 And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who cultivate peace.

The fruit of righteousness. Inner righteousness produces a certain kind of fruit. The references to fruit by Jesus and James and Paul and others are too numerous to list today. But surely you're at least familiar with them. Here's the essence as Jesus was trying to get through to the Pharisees:

Matthew 12:33-35 CSB

33 "Either make the tree good and its fruit will be good, or make the tree bad and its fruit will be bad; for a tree is known by its fruit. (That's character.) 34 Brood of vipers! How can you speak good things when you are evil? For the mouth speaks from the overflow of the heart. 35 A good person produces good things from his storeroom of good, and an evil person produces evil things from his storeroom of

evil.

Oh friend, do you long for, are you hungry and thirsty for the kind of heart Jesus is talking about? A storeroom of good producing good things? After all, that's the character of God toward you. God is good. God is so good. And because he is so good, God is love. God is loving. And when you begin to fill your storehouse with God's good fruit, nothing tops the list like God's love that can flow through you. That's the second dynamic of Kingdom righteousness: **right loving**.

You see love is at the core of everything the entire Bible is about. Listen to the familiar exchange between **Jesus** as the tricky lawyer:

Matthew 22:36-40 NLT

36 "Teacher, which is the most important commandment in the law of Moses?"

37 Jesus replied, "'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.' 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 A second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments."

You see, your right-setting behavior should be motivated by right loving. There is no greater expression of the character of God than love. It's what motivates God into action. His great love comes to the aid of those who are poor in spirit. His great compassion is what drives him to comfort those of us who are mourning. And likewise, love becomes the motivating factor in our lives as well, leading us to a third dynamic of Kingdom righteousness:

Right-setting activity.

Here's another one to write down. **Righteousness** is wanting what God wants. And I believe this is where the difference between holiness and righteousness comes in. Whereas holiness is the absence of sin, of bad behavior, righteousness is the presence of right-setting behavior. Righteousness is not just the absence of conflict, it is actively working at bringing God's will to each situation and circumstance of life. We'll see more of this playing out next week as we talk about the next beatitudes of being merciful and being a peacemaker. Friends, we are change agents, actively engaged in extraordinary acts of love and justice. From big needs of social justice in our community, to surprising reactions of grace and mercy even when people get angry with us and try to hurt us. Why? Kingdom righteousness demands that we want what God wants. In fact, the New Living Translation puts this beatitude a slightly **different** way:

Matthew 5:6 NLT

God blesses those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be satisfied.

I love this beatitude. Jesus is saying that if we hunger and thirst for it, make it our goal, we will be filled - we will be satisfied. God says righteousness is possible. God says right character is attainable. He says if we long for right loving - he will fill us with His love. He says that if we make right-setting activity our goal, our life purpose even, we will see it come to pass - we will be filled and satisfied.

Righteousness (as we've been defining it this morning) **IS possible when we live under the rule of God.** You'll remember the familiar exchange between Jesus and the rich young ruler. He was good at keeping the law - but left full of

sorrow when Jesus said to give his money to the poor so he could follow Jesus freely and lightly. Jesus told His disciples that rich folks would struggle to get into the Kingdom. Listen in on the conversation with me:

Matthew 19:25-26 NIV

[25] When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, “Who then can be saved?” [26] Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

Do you see this? Friend, Jesus believes in you. Sure He sets the bar of righteousness pretty high. But you're not in this alone. With the Father's great love for you, Jesus walking beside you, never leaving you or forsaking you, and the Holy Spirit living within you, empowering you day by day, with God all things are possible, including becoming a thriving and difference making child of righteousness.

You will be filled. You will be satisfied. There's a special kind of grammar happening here in the Greek. When the passage says “they will be filled,” or “they will be comforted,” who is doing the filling and comforting? God is. This is called a “divine passive.” There's no need to state His name, for it is implied and understood.

“When Jesus blesses the disciples who hunger and thirst for righteousness, he blesses those who make righteousness their goal. But the divine passives remind us that he is also present in our quest. He will comfort, satisfy, and show mercy to his sons and daughters as they pursue their goal².”

² Daniel M. Doriani. The Sermon of the Mount. 27

Psalm 37 is the Psalm of the Righteous. David says, "I've never seen the righteous forsaken." He is with us. He is strengthening us,

Who hungers and thirsts for righteousness? I'll tell you who. It starts at the top. God himself longs for things to be set right. In fact, the cross is the ultimate example of how far God will go to set things right.

Jesus identifies with us. He identifies with the broken heart and spirit of a life of pain and rejection. He mourns for the loss of His closest friends and family. He is lied about and slandered, not by the world, but by the church. Ain't it the truth that sometimes people experience their worst hurt in life in the church? And then, Christ himself climbs a hill of ridicule and mockery, a hill of unjust punishment, identifying with you, carrying your pain and your suffering. But what happens next is extraordinary, for in all of that suffering and even when the enemy thinks he has won the war, in the ultimate right-setting activity of all eternity - God says, "Enough is enough. Let me show you who is really in power here. Let me just reveal once and for all that nothing can hold back the life giving - resurrecting power of my deliverance and redemption."

Matthew 5:6 MSG

"You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God. He's food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat.

[Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness: We reject the appetites of a consumer society and cultivate deep personal relationships with God and

others³.]

These are the ones who desire for things to be set right. Perhaps it is in their own life. Perhaps based on the first three beatitudes, the person longs to be set right in God's eyes. Perhaps that person has been wronged. They stand there before God abused or neglected or ridiculed or forgotten and they know they need things in life to be set right. This is not how life is suppose to be and the "kingdom of the heavens has a chemistry that can transform even the past and make the terrible, irretrievable losses that human beings experience seem insignificant in the greatness of God. He restores our souls and fills us with the goodness of rightness⁴."

What do you do if you're hungry or thirsty? You eat or drink. If you want right character, you have to pursue spiritual practices that change your character. If you want to love like Jesus loves, you'll need

1. Don't forget the Beatitude Challenge.
 2. Fast from food for an entire day. Record your feelings at the end of the day.
- That's the kind of hunger and thirst we need for Righteousness of the Kingdom.

³ Eugene Peterson. *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*. 240-241.

⁴ Dallas Willard. *The Divine Conspiracy*. 117