

# Why Many Christians Don't Hunger or Thirst for Justice

There is little about the fourth Beatitude - "Blessed are those that hunger and thirst for righteousness" - that we get right.

Let's start with our concept of "righteousness." We have made it a general term for "sinlessness" - "There is none righteous, no, not one" (Romans 3:10).

This is the verse I was told to memorize to convince people that they were in fact sinners, which, curiously, I never needed to do.

No one I've ever talked to has ever disputed that they hadn't done some things wrong.

The Jewish concept of righteousness, in both the Old and New Testaments, was not a term used to indicate sinlessness, but innocence. It was a legal term used in the court.

When a dispute was brought before a judge, one party was declared to be righteous - literally "in the right." The judge wasn't saying the person was sinless, just not culpable.

When the judge decided correctly, justice was done. Judges didn't always decide correctly, but that's understandable. No justice system is without its flaws.

But when the system is rigged, when the judge was corrupt, when he favored those who could return the favor, injustice was done.

In the Bible, injustice isn't so much about trying your best but unfortunately still getting it wrong; it was about intentionally getting it wrong to favor those who had the wealth and the power to do you good or harm.

It is about purposefully denying what is right to those without the means to do anything about it. The poor. The widow. The alien.

The concepts of righteousness and justice in the Bible are so closely tied as to be almost synonymous, as are unrighteousness and injustice.

And both are closely tied with society's treatment of the poor, the powerless, the foreigner, even the sick.

Thus, it was possible to be personally very moral and personally very religious - keeping all the requirements of the faith - and not care about the injustices being done to others. This is Paul's point in Romans.

And thus, it is still possible to have done everything needed to be a born-again, Bible-believing, church-going Christian and not really care about the injustices being done to others.

I know. I grew up in a religious system that cared a lot about personal morality, particularly personal sexual morality, but rarely brought up issues of injustice. It was as if it really didn't matter.

It would be good if we could get people to simply care about injustice, but Jesus raises the bar even higher. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness," he declares.

When you are hungry, really hungry, all you care about is getting something to eat. When you are thirsty, all you care about is getting something to drink.

So here's where I think so many Christians get it all wrong: we tend to hunger and thirst for sinlessness.

Our main concern is to make sure that we become sinless - that is, forgiven - and then to help as many people as possible to become sinless.

We even define "justified" as sinlessness, hence the little ditty that justification is

“just-as-if-I’d never sinned.”

But to say, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God” (Ephesians 2:8) means, among other things, that God has taken care of our sin so that we are free to hunger and thirst about other things, like righteousness/justice.

As the prophet Micah declared, “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8)

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