

- d. Those who have been illumined to the truth and grave implications of their estrangement from God are left with an overwhelming sense of their own destitution and hopelessness. The result is an agonized heart that mourns such a tragic state of affairs – not simply one’s own lost condition, but, more profoundly, the great calamity that has come upon the whole creation. This sort of mourning doesn’t reflect the self-concern of estrangement, but a heaven-directed heart of contrition and dependence. The mourner Jesus described laments the tragic truth that all things – including himself – are not the way they are supposed to be. Thus this mourning marks those who’ve already been cleansed and renewed by Christ as much as those who, by the Spirit, are just coming to perceive their need of Him. It is the mourning that attends an illumined mind that now has eyes to see.

The one in whom the veil has been lifted now, for the first time, sees himself and the world around him as they really are. The radical nature of this illumination may be compared to a person who awakens to the startling realization that the “dream world” he was fully engaged in only moments earlier was merely an illusory construct of his own mind. As long as he remained immersed in his dream, the dream itself determined his sense of reality and his interaction with it. Only his awakening delivered him from the imaginary world of his unconscious mind. So it is with men as they live under the blindness of their estrangement.

But once having been “awakened” from their delusion, they can never return to it; their eyes will forever see what formerly escaped them and thus they will mourn until the day of consummation in which the whole creation will finally be fully restored to God and itself (Romans 8:19-25; cf. 2 Corinthians 4:1-5:8). And where this illumined mind exists, there results the disposition of meekness: discerning, unpretentious submission to God and His wisdom, will and provision. But the unveiled sight that yields humility also produces ardent longing: Those who have a share in the kingdom of heaven **hunger and thirst for righteousness** (5:6).

Here again the tendency is to view Jesus’ words through a natural (not to mention a Western) frame of reference.

- In Western culture, *righteousness* is most commonly viewed in personal terms as an individual’s moral and ethical rectitude (however defined). In contrast, the notion of *justice* generally carries a social connotation, referring more to the equitable administration of a given social order.

Biblically, however, these ideas are closely conjoined. The reason is that the ancient world didn’t typically enjoy the separation of powers taken for granted in contemporary Western culture. Moreover, the ancients didn’t regard themselves as ruled by laws so much as by men. A given ruler fulfilled the separate roles of executive, legislator and judge; in practical terms the king’s will and word were law. This paradigm characterized Hebrew culture as well: God was supreme ruler in Israel, but He mediated and administered His rule through designated human representatives – first the Judges and later the ordained Judean monarchy.

So it is that the scriptural vernacular doesn't allow for a thorough demarcation between the concepts of righteousness and justice/judgment. In fact, both terminologies are used in English translations of the Old Testament to render the same Hebrew word group (the same is true of the Greek New Testament with the *dikai-* root). These two English terms do at times render different Hebrew words, and when they appear together righteousness tends to refer more to *principle* while justice/judgment speaks to upright *practice* (cf. 2 Samuel 8:15; Isaiah 5:7, 9:7, 16:5, etc.).

Together, righteousness and justice biblically circumscribe the human obligation – *as a reflection and expression of the divine nature and character* – to be and do what is right. By implication, this “rightness” isn't determined by personal conviction or societal convention, but objective truth according to the nature of things as they exist in relation to the Creator. Righteousness and justice are defined by God Himself – not as a matter of sovereign caprice, but His own unchanging perfection, wisdom and goodness as they are expressed in His creation's shalomic order and function. For man, then, righteousness is human authenticity: man existing in full conformity to God's righteousness as His image-son.

- Many, however, view Jesus' words in natural, behavioral terms. For them, this statement is yet one more certifying “touchstone” by which professing Christians can measure themselves and the veracity of their profession. It is said to show that *true* Christians will take their sin very seriously and will actively strive to live a more obedient (“righteous”) life before God. But, like its counterparts, this mark of the heirs of the kingdom of heaven is supernatural and spiritual rather than natural and fleshly.

Conceived in natural terms, Jesus' words are owned by all religions: All repudiate sin (however they may define it) and all call their adherents to a disciplined and conformed life. In this sense, “hungering and thirsting for righteousness” is entirely within the sensibilities and capabilities of unregenerate human beings; it accords perfectly with man in his estranged state. But Jesus was referring to a disposition that is consistent with and flows out of the three preceding ones, *each of which exists uniquely within the realm of the new creation*.

As seen, the mourning Jesus spoke of isn't a self-fixated sadness or regret concerning personal failures or sinful actions as such, but the deep-seated, painful burden that comes over those who perceive the reality and gravity of a creation devastated in its alienation and rushing headlong to destroy itself, all the while seeking relief and remedy in everything except its Creator. So also hungering and thirsting for righteousness is much more than a keen desire to be rid of bad habits and behaviors and be a better person; it is the pressing, ever-present longing to see all things – including oneself – be restored to full conformity to their created design and function. *Hungering and thirsting for righteousness is longing for the recovery of shalom* (cf. Isaiah 9:1-7, 32:1-20, 35:1-10, 55:1-56:1, 62:1-12; Jeremiah 23:1-6, 33:14-16; Ezekiel 34:1-31, 36:16-38; Hosea 2:1-23; etc.).

Like its predecessors, this disposition is unavailable to the natural man; how can a person who cannot conceive of God's shalomic order hunger for it? Man in his estrangement longs for a utopia that is merely his own perfect ideal – a pseudo “shalom” conceived within the confines of his own alienation and self-isolation. It is impossible for estranged men to hunger and thirst for righteousness precisely because righteousness is *rightness* and rightness is *wholeness* (integrity): a thing discerning its true nature and existing in perfect conformity to it.

- Man is uniquely the divine image-bearer, so that, whatever is his righteousness, it is necessarily bound up in the nature and character of God Himself. How, then, can a person who is estranged from God perceive what true righteousness is, let alone pursue it?
- And being alienated from God, man is estranged even from himself. If human righteousness is authentic, full and unblemished humanness, then self-alienation and the absence of accurate self-knowledge insure that righteousness will remain veiled and unattainable; a dog that doesn't know what a dog is and is convinced it's a cat can't long to be a dog.

As with the other Beatitudes, an illumined mind (a mind that has been brought to the “repentance” of a restored awareness of the truth of what's *really* real) is the necessary foundation for the hunger and thirst Jesus spoke of. And if this disposition is a characteristic mark of the “new man,” it, too, must find its preeminent point of reference in the True Man. For whatever characterizes the subjects of the kingdom of heaven characterizes the King Himself; Jesus is the first fruits of His own kingdom – the realm of *life* – and men become His subjects only by sharing in His life and likeness. Their union with Him by His Spirit imparts His “beatific” life to them, and their fullness as “beatific” men is their future full transformation into Christ-likeness. Jesus was, indeed, characterized by this hungry longing, and perhaps no passage more powerfully affirms this than His high-priestly prayer (John 17:1-26; cf. also Luke 12:13-53; John 4:31-38).

Given what it is, it's obvious that this hungering and thirsting (like its counterparts) has both an initial and ongoing quality. It marks those who are being drawn to the kingdom as well as those who presently inhabit it as citizen-subjects. People come to Christ in submissive, unquestioning faith when their eyes have been opened, and that illumination to the truth leaves them poor in spirit, mourning and yielded without pride or pretense. In turn, they find themselves longing for the “rightness” they now see to be absent and beyond their resource.

But even as their new spiritual “sight” continues from that moment forward, so do the convictions and dispositions it produces. Their hunger and thirst brings them to Christ and His kingdom and He gives them true food and living water so that their hunger is satisfied in Him (John 4:1-14, 6:22-35, 47-51, 7:37-38). And yet the kingdom's subjects continue to hunger in the “already-but-not-yet” of the present time. Though overflowing with streams of living water, they yet long for the day of consummate fullness; in that day they will be satisfied in full.