

Are You Willing to Let Go?

INTRODUCTION:

The Los Angeles Times carried the story, "Terror on the Side of a Steep Slope." Jay Raphman, hunting deer in the Tehema Wildlife Reserve near Red Bluff climbed to a ledge on the slope of a rocky gorge and raised his head to look upon the ledge above. Then, he says, "I caught a movement to the right of my face. I instinctively pushed myself back and the rattler struck, missing my right ear."

The four foot snakes fangs got snagged in the neck of Raphman's wool turtle neck sweater, and the force of the snakes strike caused the snake to land on his left shoulder. It then coiled around his neck. He grabbed it around the neck, with his left hand and could feel the warm venom running down the skin of his neck. The rattler is making a furious racket.

He fell backward, slid head first down the steep slope, through brush and lava rocks, his rifle and binoculars bouncing beside him. "As luck would have it," he said, describing the incident, "I ended up wedged between some rocks, with my feet caught up hill, from my head. I could barely move."

He got his right hand on his rifle and used it to disengage the fangs from his sweater. But the snake had enough leverage to strike again. "He made about eight attempts and managed to hit me with his nose just below my eye about four times. I kept my face turned so he couldn't get a good angle with his fangs, but it was very close. This chap and I were eyeball to eyeball. And I found out that snakes really don't blink. He had fangs like a darning needle. I had to choke him to death with my own hands. It was the only way out. I was afraid with all the blood rushing to my head I might pass out." But when Raphman tried to toss the

dead snake aside he said, "I could not let go. I had to pry my fingers from its neck."

Raphman, age 45, spoke with the warden Dave Smith. Smith says of meeting Raphman. "He walked toward me holding this long string of rattlers and he said with this sort of grin on his face, "I'd like to register a complaint about your wild life here."

Have you been fighting snakes lately? Do you have a hard time letting go of certain attitudes or behaviors that keep you from being all that God wants you to be in Christ? Is there a pocket of spiritual poverty that refuses to let go? You have mourned over it and committed it to the Holy Spirit to help you, but it still seems so easy to grab, but hard to let go. Selfism—the worship and catering to self—is easy to grab and hold on to, but extremely hard to get rid of.

In the beatitudes Jesus gave us principles for letting go of those critters. There is a spiritual progression in the beatitudes as they build on one another, each depending on the one before it. There is "spiritual progression of relentless logic," observes John Stott.

Each step leads to the next and presupposes the one that has gone before. To begin with, we are to be "poor in spirit," acknowledging our complete and utter spiritual bankruptcy before God. Next we are to "mourn" over the cause of it, our sins, yes, and our sins too—the corruption of our fallen nature, and the reign of sin and death in the world. Thirdly, we are to be "meek," humble and gentle towards others, allowing our spiritual poverty (admitted and bewailed) to condition our behavior to them as well as to God. And fourthly we are to "hunger and thirst for righteousness." For what is the use of confessing and lamenting our sin, of acknowledging the truth about ourselves to both God and men, if we leave it there? Confession of

sin must lead to hunger for righteousness (*The Message of the sermon on the Mount*, p. 46).

Can you sincerely describe your relationship with God saying, "I love You with all my heart?" Let's ask ourselves how badly we want to change in these key areas of our lives.

HOW BADLY DO YOU WANT TO CHANGE?

In what area of spiritual growth do I want to bring about change? What is my poverty of spirit in my Christian walk? Is there an area of my Christian life where I can honestly say to myself, "I have a problem." What is my spiritual poverty? What is the sin I tend to hold on to tightly? Do I have a hard time thinking God's way?

For My thoughts are not your thoughts,
Nor are your ways My ways," declares the LORD.
"For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are My ways higher than your ways
And My thoughts than your thoughts (Isaiah 55:8-9).

The Holy Spirit reveals to us areas of spiritual need that we would never be aware of otherwise. We would never think of it on our own because depravity has effected our way of thinking. Has the Spirit convicted you of a needy area? Has He put His finger on some sin that needs to be dealt with? Where is the area of spiritual growth that the Holy Spirit wants to bring about in my life?

Has it become so convicting that you are mourning over it? Do you feel the pain of death? Are you grieving over your spiritual poverty? Does it seem to have a strong grip over you? Do you want to be set free so badly that you hunger

for it?

God has provided the power to bring about change for the Spirit-controlled person. The Spirit gives us the self-discipline required to bring these changes. Our problem is so big that we cannot do it in our own strength. To what extent am I claiming the spiritual resources that God gives through His Spirit?

So the question before us is how badly do I want to change? Has it become so intense that it is like a man starving to death? Is it like someone who is extremely thirsty?

THE SPIRITUALLY PROSPEROUS HAVE A PASSION FOR PERSONAL RIGHTEOUSNESS

Jesus tells us we must have an intense longing after righteousness. He said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied" (Matthew 5:6).

This "hungering and thirsting" signifies a genuine continual craving of the soul. He is not referring to an occasional desire to be right, but "a passionate concern" for that which is right. This is a metaphor for an intense longing desire. You want it so strongly you feel the pangs for it. It is a matter of life and death. Your very existence depends on that one-cup of water, or that one loaf of bread.

This intense craving is a hungering for something necessary in life. The inner person must be fed and it is the evidence of life. Spiritually dead people have no appetite for spiritual things. The apathetic are anemic in their spiritual life? What do I for crave in life? What am I hungry for?

The Greek grammar expresses a "hunger and thirst" for the whole things. I want the whole loaf of bread. I want the whole bucket of water.

Jesus told a one-sentence parable of the merchant who sold everything to purchase one great extremely valuable pearl of great wealth (Matthew 13:45-46). Jesus said, "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls, and upon finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it."

Jesus said we must hunger and thirst after "righteousness." "Righteousness" means to be right with God, and in our personal lives it means being and doing what is right. It is a perfect conformity to God's holy law and His will. I like the way John Stott expresses it, "The hungry and thirsty whom God satisfies are those who 'hunger and thirst for righteousness.' Such spiritual hunger is characteristic of all God's people, whose supreme ambition is not material but spiritual. Christians are not like pagans, engrossed in the pursuit of possessions; what they have set themselves to 'seek first' is God's kingdom and righteousness."

Another way of describing this hunger is found in Matthew 22:37 when Jesus said, "YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND." If we love Him we will obey Him (John 14:15). If we have an obedience problem we have a love problem. This beatitude helps us to love Him with all our heart.

Imputed Righteousness

Jesus is addressing those who already belong to Him. Such individuals have been pronounced right with God based upon what Christ did for us. This is our legal righteousness or justification. God declared us righteous in His presence the very moment we believed on Jesus Christ as our personal Savior. This is not a self-righteousness, or righteousness obtained by works of obedience or fulfilling a religious law. What God offers is righteousness by faith in Jesus Christ.

"Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (Romans 10:4). The only obedience that satisfies God the Father is the obedience of Christ. We are declared to be in a right relationship with God based upon the person and atoning work of Jesus Christ. "That if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved; for with the heart man believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation . . . for whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10:9-10, 13).

This *imputed* righteousness is a right standing the believer has before God because of the atoning work of Jesus Christ on his behalf. It is totally unmerited. It is an act of grace on God's behalf toward the unrighteous person. Matthew "is not suggesting that people can make a strong effort and achieve the righteousness of which he is writing: it is a given righteousness, not an achieved righteousness. The blessed do not achieve it but *hunger and thirst* for it," observes Leon Morris.

The legal basis of such imputed righteousness is the death of Christ. Jesus died as our substitute (2 Cor. 8:9; Matt. 20:28; Mk. 10:45; Matt. 26:28; Eph. 1:7; 1 Pet. 1:19; Rev. 5:9). Paul makes that clear in II Corinthians 5:21. "He [God] made Him [Jesus] who knew no sin *to be* sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." This is our *position* in Christ. Cf. Ps. 32:1-2; Rom. 4:3, 5, 9b, 13, 16, 22, 24; Gal. 3:5ff.

Imparted Righteousness

In these words of Jesus there is the emphasis on the *impartation* of righteousness. "Though it is impossible for good works to justify anybody, it is just as impossible for a justified person to live without doing good works," writes William Hendriksen. The term Jesus uses embraces both imputed and imparted

righteousness.

There must be an intense desire to live a life of righteousness, to be pleasing to God with my daily life. This is my progressive sanctification. I fear for those who say they are saved, but care nothing for their daily walk with Christ. How tragic to be saved, secure and apathetic. Surely that is not what Jesus has in mind here. Jesus said God will fill those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. A little later in Matthew Jesus says, "seek first His kingdom and His righteousness" (Matthew 6:33).

Morris reminds us, "the term here includes the doing of right, an indication that we are expected to live in full accordance with the will of God. How could anyone have a strong desire for a right standing before God without at the same time strongly wanting to do the right? . . . It is a righteousness that people cannot produce of themselves. . . This righteousness is a gift of God." It is not something a person can achieve of himself. "God fills their longing. God will not disappoint anyone who has this deep desire to do His will" (*Matthew*, p. 99).

Just as the body hungers for food and water these people hunger to be like God. They have a deep passion for personal righteousness. It is the hunger for moral good. They want to obtain the righteousness that God demands in their lives. We depend not upon our own power to achieve righteousness, but upon God. It depends on our cooperating with the Holy Spirit. We allow Him to produce that righteous life in and through us.

It is only those who "hunger and thirst" after God's righteousness who will be fully satisfied. "The righteousness imputed and imparted by God must be the object of intense desire, earnest yearning, and relentless pursuit," writes Hendriksen.

How does this hunger and thirst for righteousness become fully satisfied? By the imputation of Christ's merits. Thus we obtain a righteousness of inner condition and outward conduct. Cf. Romans 8:3-5; II Corinthians 3:18; II Thessalonians 2:13. These two are inseparable: those for whom Christ died are sanctified by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, those whose sins are forgiven render the sacrifice of thanksgiving (*Matthew*, p. 274).

D. M. Lloyd-Jones is correct when he says: "It is the desire to be free from sin in all its forms and in its every manifestation."

Augustine: "Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee."

The apostle Paul prayed for the Philippian church, "that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which *comes* through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God" (Phil. 1:11). The Christian life is not static; it is a growing thing (3:12-14).

On a scale from 1 to 10 how hungry am I for spiritual things? What is my attitude toward personal righteousness? What do I hunger for in life? To what extent do I hunger for God's Word? How is my appetite for the truth of the Bible? How is my appetite for fellowship with other believers? What is my attitude toward worship? What is my attitude toward deep spiritual truths? In what ways am I growing in my love for holiness? Do I long to be with mature Spirit-filled Christians? Would I rather be with carnal, immature people? How hungry am I for the works of the flesh? Do I sincerely pray "Lord, keep me from the temptation of my easily besetting sin?" Do I long to have God pronounce the

verdict "righteous" as His decision over me in the judgment?

Jesus Christ is our perfect model of hungering and thirsting for righteousness.

A RIGHTEOUSNESS THAT SATISFIES

Jesus said those who have this "wholehearted longing" for righteousness will have a full measure. They won't get just a taste; they will get the whole thing. They will be satisfied fully. I know you'll like this: They will be fattened! The original word was used to fatten animals. We will be fully satisfied. But it comes only to those who "hunger and thirst," and to no one else.

Don't miss the emphasis Jesus is making. This is all of grace. Even in the Christian's life this righteousness is a gift of God. We do not achieve it in ourselves. "God will not disappoint anyone who has this deep desire to do His will." This blessing does not come "indiscriminately to all the race, but only to those who seek it wholeheartedly." Moreover, "the seekers do not fill themselves with righteousness, but are filled; righteousness is a gift of God." (Morris).

Jesus used the word "satisfied" with a root meaning the placing where the grass grows and animals graze. It describes cattle feeding on a beautiful, luxurious, green meadow. The ideas are to satisfy with food, to be fed full, and completely satisfied. "They who hunger and thirst for righteousness shall, under the Messiah's reign, be fed full, completely satisfied." However, it does not mean to be full once and for all, so as to have no more desire. John Broadus says, "this satisfaction will be progressive in the present life, and become perfect as we enter upon the perfect world."

The passive "shall be filled" denotes a gift of God to those fulfilling the condition making them "righteous" in His presence. God does it. It is His gift to

the believing sinner.

"Hungering and thirsting" are in durative present tenses, i.e., the hungering and thirsting continues and increases in the very act of being satisfied.

Lord Jesus increase my hunger for you. Please increase my capacity to love you. It was to the church at Ephesus the risen glorified Lord Jesus in heaven said these haunting words, "I have this one thing against you, you have lost your first love" (Revelation 2:4). Oh, Lord don't let that happen in our lives. If and when we do find ourselves guilty of losing our first love here is the answer. Jesus said, "Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent" (v. 5).

Even the apostle Paul did not come to a place of no further growth in his spiritual life. In a context which speaks of being conformed to the image and likeness of Christ he says, "Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you; however, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained" (Philippians 3:15-16). Paul makes it clear that he had not come to the place in his Christian life where growth in spiritual maturity has been completed, beyond which there is no room for future development, and that as a result he is now in a state of absolute spiritual maturity. He has not reached a spiritual impasse of non-development.

The word "perfect" here is not referring to sinless perfection. He is talking about relative, spiritual mature, stages of growth. We are perfect in growth at a certain stage in our lives. Ann and I have an 18 month old granddaughter who is perfect for an eighteen month old, but not for an eighteen year old. It means "full-grown" in contradistinction to undeveloped. It is used of a full-grown man as

opposed to an undeveloped youth. It is used to mean a professor of "mature in mind" who is "qualified in a subject" as opposed to a new student in the subject. In other words, there is plenty of room for us to continue to grow in His image and likeness until He returns for us.

This attitude is the opposite of the righteousness of the Pharisees which was fatal. Theirs was a self-righteousness. In our day it is Jesus Christ plus anything else. To believe oneself to be in possession of righteousness of his own making or contribution is fatal. We receive an imputed righteousness that is imparted through the work of the Holy Spirit. Even what we produce is of grace. God does it through His Holy Spirit working in and through us as we yield to Him.

Dikaiosune is plainly a gift which God gives to those who ask for it. It is the only way God will give it. We must depend upon the power of God to achieve moral righteousness in our personal life.

There is perhaps no greater secret of progress in Christian living than a healthy, hearty, spiritual appetite. How good is my spiritual appetite? What do I crave in my spiritual life? God satisfies only those who are thirsty. "If we are conscious of slow growth, is the reason that we have a jaded appetite? It is not enough to mourn over past sin; we must also hunger for future righteousness" (Stott).

Not only must we have a sense of poverty in righteousness, but Jesus emphasized we must "have a passionate and persistent longing for it" (Plummer). How serious am I about having a right relationship with God? Do I crave for a mature, intimate love relationship with Jesus Christ? Am I serious about it? How strongly do I crave that kind of relationship with Him?

What am I hungering and thirsting for in life? Complete this sentence: "I would be happy if _____?" "For to me living is _____, and to die is

_____."

The righteousness in our daily life includes a moral righteousness that pleases God in our character and conduct. This is an inner righteousness of the heart, mind and motive that manifest it in our outward behavior. The root of that righteousness is in the heart. Our imputed right relationship with God should work itself out in our moral imparted righteousness. The Holy Spirit works out what He has placed within. This is what we should be hungering and thirsting for in our daily life. "Biblical righteousness," says Stott, "is more than a private and personal affair; it includes social righteousness as well. Martin Luther expressed this when he said, "What is required is a hunger and thirst for righteousness that can never be curbed or stopped or sated, one that looks for nothing and cares for nothing except the accomplishment and maintenance of the right, despising everything that hinders this end."

Only observed behavior changes. To whom am I accountable to besides God? Do you have someone other than God to whom you are accountable?

In a very real sense we are what we eat spiritually.

What is it that I seek with all my desire and desire it above all else? Do I have a burning thirst for God's will to be done in my life, home, work and professional life? Do I long for God's will to be done like people who are hungry and thirsty long for food and drink? Do I want more than anything else to do God's will? Do I want others to do likewise? Do I want to see the members of my church seek with all their heart to do God's will, or am I pursuing selfish-pleasure?

In my intimate love relationship with Christ there should constant appetite. "Our hunger is satisfied only to break out again" if we are true believers. "Even the promise of Jesus that whoever drinks of the waters He gives 'will never thirst'

is fulfilled only if we keep drinking. Beware of those who claim to have attained, and who look to past experiences rather than to future development! Like all the qualities included in the beatitudes, hunger and thirst are perpetual characteristics of the disciples of Jesus, as perpetual as poverty of spirit, meekness and mourning. Not till we reach heaven will we 'hunger no more, neither thirst any more,' for only then will Christ our Shepherd lead us 'to springs of living water'" (Stott. P. 46).

I heard a story about a man who was lost in a desert in the Southwest, U. S. He was dying for a drink of water. He stumbled upon an old ram shackled, windowless, roofless, weather-beaten dump. He looked around then sat down in the shade of the shack to get away from the heat of the desert sun. About fifteen feet way there was an old, rusty water pump. He dragged himself over to the pump and grabbed the handle and began to pump up and down, up and down. Nothing came out. It was bone dry.

Disappointed he staggered back to the shack. As he glanced around the place he noticed off to the side an old jug. He took it, wiped off the dirt, and read a message written on the old label. “You have to prime the pump with *all* the water in this jug, my friend. P. S.: Be sure you fill the jug again before you leave.”

He unscrewed the cap and sure enough there was a jug full of water. Now he was faced with a decision. He could drink the water and live. On the other hand, he could pour all the water into the old rusty pump, and maybe it would yield fresh, cool water from the deep well. He could have all the water he wanted.

He weighed the options and possibilities. What should he do? He could pour the water into the old rusty pump and take a chance or he could ignore the message and drink the water. There was no telling how long ago those instructions were written.

Reluctantly he picked up the jug and walked over to the well and poured all the water into the pump. Then he grabbed the handle of the pump and began to pump as fast as he could. . . squeak, squeak, squeak the old leather valves sounded like they were tearing apart. Then a little bit of water began to dribble out, then a little more water, and finally it gushed forth. Clean, clear, cold, fresh water poured out the rust old pump. He drank and almost drowned himself in the beautiful, clear water.

Then he took the jug for the next weary traveler. Before setting the jug down he added this note: “Believe me, it really works. You have to give it all away before you can get anything back.”

God’s Plan for Man’s Salvation