

Lesson Four

Greatly Honored Are Those Who Are Famished and Parched for Justice!

Scripture: Matthew 5:6; Luke 6:21a, 25a; Psalm 107:1-9

Key Idea

Jesus promises sustenance to the famished, but calls the “stuffed” to account.

Prepare To Study

Read the lesson. Read Psalm 107:1-9.

Christ Candle Liturgy

Lighting the Christ Candle: As we consider the thirsty and the hungry, we recall that God will satisfy them. As we consider those suffering from injustice, we recall that God will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Prayer: Lord, with our sisters and brothers, we affirm: “We believe that we are called in the Spirit to account for the hope that is within us through Jesus Christ and believe that justice shall prevail and peace shall reign” (Accra Confession, para. 32). May it be so. Amen.

You Who Are Famished: The Version in Luke

“Mom, I’m hungry! I’m thirsty!” It is the refrain of childhood all over the world. For the most part, here in the global north, such a complaint is easily answered with a snack or a promise that a meal will soon follow. For many of us, hunger is a temporary sensation, easily addressed by plentiful access to food and drink. However, when we turn to the fourth beatitude, we discover a hunger neither quickly nor easily satisfied. Jesus teaches this beatitude both to the crowd on the plain in Luke and to the disciples on the mountain in Matthew. However, each of these teachings is slightly different, and each reveals to us different truths about the nature of God and about Christ’s call to discipleship.

We begin with the shorter of the two versions: the one in Luke. Jesus is sitting on a plain in front of people, many of whom may be among the poorest of society, the destitute. To this crowd, Jesus declares: “You who are *peinontes* (pay-NOHN-tes), you who are famished are greatly honored.” Here, Jesus uses a deeply descriptive word, one that speaks not of the mild hunger of a child coming from play, but of the chronic, deep-seated, life-threatening hunger that the poorest of the poor know on a daily basis. When this word occurs in the Bible, it often describes those who are fasting for extended periods of time, like Jesus in the wilderness (Lk. 4:2), or those experiencing famine, like the Egyptians under Joseph’s rule (Gen. 41:55). To be famished is to understand viscerally the need for and the blessing of daily bread.

Under Roman imperial rule, the famished were everywhere. As the city of Rome grew, it demanded more and more crops from its colonies. The result, as we saw in the previous two lessons, was that those under Roman rule had access to less and less nourishment.

Famines were very common, even in the Roman provinces in northern Africa, the breadbasket of Rome. What nutritious food there was went to feed the affluent of Rome's colonies, those who ruled on behalf of Rome. The poor, those who had nothing to do but follow a wandering preacher on the plains of Palestine, they would have known nothing but daily, persistent hunger. These are the famished whom Jesus calls honorable.

If a member of the affluent class happened to be listening to Jesus as he spoke on the plain, this beatitude would have been just as confusing as the first three. For, in Jesus' culture, to be a "real man" meant to be able to feed oneself and one's family. To not be able to do so, particularly if one was a man, was a mark of shame. Beggars, thus, were less than human because they could not care for themselves. The affluent would have ignored beggars like Bartimaeus in Mark 10:46–52, or the man at the Beautiful Gate of the temple in Acts 3:1–10. And, if they gave them alms, it was to show how much more upright these affluent folk were than the rest of the community. Certainly, it would have astonished them to consider the famished as honored.

(1) Does it surprise you that Jesus calls those who are famished "greatly honored?" Why or why not?

Those Who Are Famished and Parched for Justice: The Version in Matthew

When we turn to the beatitudes that Jesus teaches his disciples on the mountain, we find that his teaching here is somewhat different. In Matthew, Jesus declares, "Greatly honored are those who are famished and parched for *dikaiosyne* (di-ky-oh-SOON-ay)," for justice.

Any of you who are astute readers will note immediately that your English translations of the Bible all use the word righteousness here. Most English translations do. They are following a tradition that dates back to the sixteenth century when biblical translator William Tyndale translated the Greek word *dikaiosyne* into the Old English *rihtwis*, which became our English word righteousness. As the word became more and more used by English speakers of the Bible, we began to assume that there was a distinction between righteousness and justice. Righteousness was seen as more of an individual state of morality or holiness. Justice was something imposed on us from the outside. The chasm became so great that some argued forthrightly that justice was not a key concept in Christianity.

However, if you were to look back in history sixteen centuries before Tyndale, and much farther back than that, you would find that the Greek *dikaiosyne* meant "justice," and this certainly was its primary meaning during Jesus' day. "Justice," here, should not be confused with "judgment." Rather, justice is a state of right relationship with God and neighbor. In Leviticus 19:9–10, 15, it means dealing as fairly with the poor as with the rich. In Deuteronomy 24:17–22, it means treating widows, orphans, and foreigners exactly as you would treat the married, those with parents, and citizens.

In Matthew, Jesus charges his disciples to honor those who are famished and parched for justice, for the kind of right relationships between people and God that were the original

vision of God. These are the people who, even if they were not mourning or destitute or humbled, yearned as if they were famished and parched, for right relationships among all people. While they themselves might have had no power to bring about this vision of right relationship, they knew it to be God's heart, and they longed for the day it would be brought about.

(2) Do you know people who are famished and parched for justice, for right relationships between God and neighbor? Who are they and what causes you to think of them in this way?

Fed or Stuffed? The Rebuke in Luke

Both in Luke and in Matthew, Jesus makes the same promise to those who are famished, either for food or for justice: "They shall be *chortazo* (kor-TAH-zoh)". ** This verb, which means "to feed," derives from a word that means "pasture" or "grass." In much of the Bible, the word is used exclusively for the pasturing of animals.¹ One way to translate this is "they shall be filled" or "they shall be satisfied." Jesus' use of *chortazo*, both in Matthew and Luke, hearkens to the promise that God will shepherd God's people, leading them, as the beloved Psalm 23 says, to green pastures beside still waters. Those who are famished, or famished and parched for justice, will receive a response from a loving, life-giving God who provides for their needs as a shepherd provides pasture for flocks of sheep. By promising that those who are famished will be fed, Jesus renews the promise of provision given long ago to God's people (Gen. 1:29–30).

When we turn to Luke 6:25a, Jesus seems to be contradicting himself. "Shame on you who are filled now," he says. Here, the English translations are not our friends. Reading them at face value, we might think that Jesus is simply reversing roles. Those who are empty will be full, and those who are full will be empty. However, when we take a closer look, we realize that Jesus intentionally uses two different words for "full."

In the rebuke, Jesus uses the word *empimplemi* (em-PIMP-lay-mee), ** a word that might be translated "sated" or "stuffed."² In other words, while Jesus uses a verb about pasturing flocks for the promise, in his rebuke he uses a verb that means "stuffing oneself." Jesus heaps shame on those who fill their bellies full while others around them are famished. If one is eating that much, surely one has enough to share with the famished. Jesus' distinction between the one being fed by a just God and the one whose belly is stuffed in the face of hunger is the same distinction that he has made throughout these four beatitudes—a distinction between the affluent and the destitute.

(3) Do you hear the rebuke in Luke 6:25a differently now that you know that Jesus uses two different Greek words for the word "filled"? How would you describe the difference?

Poetry and Parallels

Many of you, by now, might suspect that the Beatitudes, both in Matthew and in Luke, are poems. As contemporary readers of English poets, we have certain expectations of poems, whether the poets are Emily Dickinson or Queen Latifah. The people of Jesus' day would

have had expectations of poems, also; they would have expected poems to contain lines that paralleled each other. Parallel lines of poetry help the poet reinforce his point by repeating it, by explaining it in more detail, or by showing its opposite.

So how does Jesus, the poet, use parallelism? First, Jesus uses parallelism to explain each of his teachings in more detail. He begins by explaining who is honored, and, in the second half of each beatitude, goes on to explain why they are honored. So, the destitute and destitute in spirit are not honored for their destitution, but because God's reign is made of them. The mourners and weepers are not honored for their grief, but because God will comfort them. The humbled ones are not honored for their humility, but because they are the true heirs of earth. Those who are famished for food and justice are honored not for their want, but because God will pasture them. In each of these teachings, Jesus makes it clear that these groups are not honored for what they are facing, but because God will intervene on their behalf.

But Jesus also uses parallelism to repeat himself, for the destitute and destitute in spirit are also the mourners and the weepers. The promise that God's reign is made of them signals the apocalyptic promise that God will wipe every tear from their eyes (Rev. 7:17, 21:4). In the same way, the humbled ones also are those who are famished for food and justice; and it is from their inherited portion—the earth—that God will pasture them until they are fed. Further, all four of these honored groups, taken together, give us a picture of a single group of people: a group that often is forgotten by society. The promises given each one in Matthew, taken together, also reinforce a truth, a truth that will lead us into confession: although society may forget these sisters and brothers, they are central to the heart of God.

(4) What new insights do you have about the first four beatitudes after learning about parallelism? What might be true about the next four beatitudes?

(5) Read the Accra Confession, 28–33, on pages 81–82. How do our Reformed sisters and brothers seek to honor the famished and parched for food and justice?

Processus Confessionis: Recognizing, Learning, and Confessing What Is True

As we turn to confession once more, we face the good news that God cares for those whom the world forgets: those who are hungry and thirsty, and those who are famished and parched for justice. God promises not only to recognize these sisters and brothers, but also to provide for them as a shepherd provides for sheep and, as the psalmist promises, lead them to green pastures beside still waters. Our Savior Christ instructs us, as his disciples, to honor these famished sisters and brothers, knowing they are the special concern of God.

Yet, even as we acknowledge the providence of God, Jesus' rebuke of the stuffed can shine a bright and unpleasant light on our context. We live in a nation where everyone is constantly on a diet. We take pills and read books on how to eat less food and how to live more simply. Even our pets, our dogs and cats, have more choices for food than they can possibly eat. Yet, the poor live among us—those who do not get enough to eat, or who suffer malnutrition. In fact, in our rich nation, some among us regularly go to bed truly famished.

In the global south, realities are even starker. Claudio Carvalhaes, at the 2009 Big Tent event of the PC(USA), pointed this out in his sermon. “We make up,” he said, “four percent of the world’s population and eat up forty-nine percent of its resources.” As Presbyterians, we acknowledge this as true. During the 2008 General Assembly, our commissioners studied the global food crisis in which we live. They learned that, while we in the United States struggle with expanding waistlines, three billion of the planet’s people live on less than \$2 US per day!³ They learned that the causes of the global food crisis include costly fuel, scarcity of water, lack of land, and climate change. They invited us, who are followers of Christ, to “meaningful coordinated actions” on behalf of those who are famished for food and who are famished and parched for justice.⁴

In the face of this fourth beatitude, I confess with gratitude that the God of our ancestors truly is a shepherd who promises that those who are famished for food and for justice ultimately will be fed, just as a shepherd feeds her sheep. Jesus Christ, who came among us as the Good Shepherd, calls all of his disciples to honor their famished sisters and brothers, knowing they are the particular concern of God. Yet, even as I celebrate the goodness of God, I am faced with the truth that I often have far more to eat than I need. Even as I celebrate the justice of God, making relationships right, I confess that I often ignore cries for justice as beyond my concern or beyond my ability to help. Yet, I trust that the God who leads the famished to be fed also will lead me in paths of justice. Following the lead of the Christ who calls me, I will seek to honor—with my prayers and my gifts, my voice and my actions—these famished sisters and brothers of mine.

Sisters, beloved of God, what is your confession?

(6) Individually or as a group, write Part Four of your confession, confessing the truth about God, your community, and those who are famished for food and justice. Include in your confession implications for your discipleship. Use the group confession worksheet on page 78 for extra help.

(7) Given the fourth part of your confession, what small steps will you take as a community of faith to honor those who are famished among you?

Prayer

God of the harvest, many are hungry. Many more thirst for justice. Awaken us to how we contribute to the hunger and thirst of our neighbors. Teach us to feed your people with food and justice, even as you fed your people with manna, that all may be satisfied. Amen.

The Greek Words in Lesson Four

Peinontes (pay-NOHN-tes) means “famished.”

Dikaiosyne (di-ky-oh-SOON-ay) means “justice,” but often is translated “righteousness.”

Chortazo (kor-TAH-zoh) means “fed” or “pastured.”

Empimplemi (em-PIMP-lay-mee) means “stuffed” or “filled all the way up.”

Notes

1. Topel, 99–100 (see Lesson Two, note 4, p. 21).

2. Ibid., 120.

3. See “Global Food Crisis,” a resource developed by the office of the Presbyterian Hunger Program for the 218th General Assembly (2008) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). It is available alongside other Confessing the Beatitudes materials at <http://horizons.pcusa.org/bible.htm>. Visit <http://gamc.pcusa.org/ministries/hunger> for more on the Hunger Program.

4. Bruce Reyes-Chow, moderator of the 218th General Assembly (2008) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.),
to the assembly.