

“The Soul’s Virtues: Hunger for Justice”
Matthew 5:6

One of the classic Christmas movies is "A Christmas Story," which tells the nostalgic tale of a 9-year-old boy named Ralphie Parker living in the 1940s. The film captures his hilarious and sometimes frustrating journey through family life, school, and neighborhood bullies, all with one singular goal: to get an "Official Red Ryder Carbine-Action Two-Hundred-Shot Range Model Air Rifle" for Christmas. Ralphie wanted that BB gun with a singular, desperate longing. He hungered for it and did everything in his power to subtly influence his parents to get it for him. Here is a scene showing Ralphie’s desperation and longing: <https://youtu.be/ppOXpyhM2wA>.

We all can relate to this kind of experience—this deep, all-consuming longing for something. Consider the time you might have experienced such a powerful hunger or thirst that all you could think about was getting food and water. Jesus was tapping into this primal human longing when he gave his fourth beatitude: **"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."** (Matthew 5:6).

Jesus knew about the soul's deep virtues: empathy and connection to others. He wanted his followers to rediscover this yearning, this deep hunger for a world set right. The harshness of our human experiences often dims this longing within us. We often think of ourselves as separate from others, but deep within us, God has wired us for connection and for empathy. Our spiritual work is to rediscover this innate virtue and allow it to come to the forefront of our awareness.

This kind of connection is hardwired into our being. Psychologists call it emotional contagion. Consider a couple of examples: when babies are in a nursery and one begins to cry, the others often start crying as well. When you see someone distressed, you often feel their distress. Laughter, too, is often contagious.

We often think of justice as something that happens outside of ourselves, only in the public realm, but the roots of justice are deeply implanted in our hearts. Our hunger and thirst for righteousness are about the deep connection we share as human beings, a connection forged by the Spirit of our Creator.

Most of the people in Jesus' time were living with a profound sense of disconnection because of the harsh realities of the Roman Empire: exploitation, fear of violence, and abject poverty. They were hungry for justice and for a change in their circumstances—so hungry that there were several attempts to rebel against the Roman rule. They longed for freedom and liberation, but often believed it could only come through a violent revolution. These were the only means they knew, as most humans tend to fall into the trap of believing that violence can bring lasting peace.

Jesus was challenging them to go deep within themselves to live out God's vision for the world, even as the realities around them seemed to be telling them the opposite. The transformation needed to happen within them. They needed to get in touch with their deep hunger for justice as a way to connect with others, instead of separating from those they defined as their enemies.

As writer and teacher Cynthia Bourgeault notes, "The key to this fourth Beatitude lies in understanding what the word "righteousness" means. To our post-Puritan, post-Victorian ears, righteousness... means being moral, behaving correctly. But in Israel of Jesus' times, righteousness was something much more dynamic. Visualize it as a force field: an energy-charged sphere of holy presence. To be 'in the righteousness of God'... means to be directly connected to this vibrational field, to be anchored within God's own aliveness... To 'hunger and thirst after righteousness,' then, speaks to this intensity of connectedness."

Jesus promises that when the hunger arises within you to find your own deepest aliveness within God's aliveness, it will be satisfied. In fact, the hunger itself is a sign that the bond is already in place. As we enter the path of transformation, the most valuable thing we have working in our favor is our yearning. In this Beatitude, Jesus is not talking about doing virtuous deeds so you'll be rewarded later; he is talking about being in connection with your fundamental yearning.

This yearning turns our cultural views and ego instincts about being separate upside down. We are connected to one another—friends, enemies, and all. Our work is to trust and to grow our yearning for this deep connection with one another and with God.

To help us get in touch with this hunger for connection and loving kindness, I invite you to participate in this simple meditation.

Loving Kindness Meditation:

Step 1: Grounding and Centering Find a comfortable position, either sitting or lying down. Gently close your eyes or soften your gaze. Take a few slow, deep breaths. With each inhale, breathe in God's peace. With each exhale, release any tension or distraction. Feel yourself anchored in this moment, held by the love of our Creator.

Step 2: Cultivating Loving Kindness for Yourself Bring to mind the simple phrase: **"May I be filled with loving kindness. May I be well in body and mind. May I be peaceful and at ease."** Repeat this phrase slowly and silently to yourself. Let the words wash over you, knowing that God's grace and love are a gift for you. Allow yourself to feel worthy of this kindness.

Step 3: Extending to Those You Love Now, bring to mind someone you love dearly. Imagine them in your mind's eye. Visualize them in a moment of happiness or peace.

Now, extend the loving kindness phrase to them, saying: **"May you be filled with loving kindness. May you be well in body and mind. May you be peaceful and at ease."** As you repeat this, feel your heart opening and sending love to them.

Step 4: Extending to All Beings Expand your awareness beyond those you know personally. Picture a wider circle—your community, your city, your country, and finally, the entire world. In this circle, include those you know, those you don't know, and even those with whom you have a difficult relationship. Now, with a heart of expansive empathy, repeat the phrase for all of them: **"May all beings be filled with loving kindness. May all beings be well in body and mind. May all beings be peaceful and at ease."**

Step 5: Returning and Reflecting Take one more deep breath, bringing your awareness back to your own body. As you finish the meditation, know that the hunger for justice and righteousness is not a heavy burden, but a blessed yearning—a sign that you are deeply connected to the heart of God. Carry this awareness with you throughout your day, trusting that as you seek to live from this place of connection, you will indeed be filled. Amen.