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Matthew 5:2–6, English Standard Version.

He said:

³ *“Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

⁴ *Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.*

⁵ *Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.*

⁶ *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.*

John 4:7–14, English Standard Version.

⁷ *When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, “Will you give me a drink?”* ⁸ *(His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)*

⁹ *The Samaritan woman said to him, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?”* *(For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)*

¹⁰ *Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”*

¹¹ *“Sir,” the woman said, “you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water?”* ¹² *Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?”*

¹³ *Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”*

Blessed are those who thirst.

Our two passages today are very popular; we’ve looked at them before. The first comes from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, which forms the beginning of

and sets the tone for the Sermon on the Mount by pointing out the humble nature of a true believer. This is one who values the things of God's world more than the things of the world of people. Our quote consists of the first four Beatitudes. I want to focus on the fourth Beatitude today: *⁶Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*

The second quote today is the story of the Samaritan woman at the well. Here's a little background. At one point, the powerful Assyrian Empire had conquered the southern portion of Israel, which was called Judah. The Assyrians had then sent pagan colonists into this region. The Assyrians also forced out many of the Israelites who had been living in Judah, which included Jerusalem, sending them into exile. This exile happened a hundred and fifty years before the Babylonian exile. The goal was to remove any possibility of the Israelites ever regaining control of Israel by making sure that their leaders were dispersed. The Samaritans were a people who then emerged from the intermarriage of the Jews who remained in Israel with the pagan colonists sent there by the Assyrians. You can understand why the Jews would develop a negative attitude toward the Samaritans. The Samaritans developed their own religious book, called the Samaritan Torah. Because of their pagan blood and their hybrid religion, the Samaritans were considered impure by the Jews of Jesus' day – despite the fact

they were indeed monotheists who believed in the same God as the Jews. This caused the Samaritans to form their own religious and national identities and to separate themselves from their Jewish cousins.

As a Jew, Jesus wasn't supposed to go into the land of the Samaritans. To the Jews, when he walked to the well and greeted the Samaritan woman, he was visiting a people who had perverted the Jewish faith. But of course, Jesus had no problem associating with marginalized people. He did this all during his ministry. And Jesus' interaction with this Samaritan woman is even more amazing than meets the eye – because there is something subtle, but very important, about the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. It is one of the longest dialogues in the Gospels. In it, the Samaritan woman holds her own in the conversation better than most other people who ever spoke with Jesus. He showed tremendous respect for her, engaging her in an extended dialogue and letting her speak her mind. Jewish men at the time would not have spoken with an unknown woman at all, let alone a Samaritan, and they certainly would not have been deferential to a strange woman. Jesus is making a point: this woman is valuable as a potential believer, valuable as having been made in God's image, and in fact, she has overcome her checkered past, her heritage, and her traditional role in this ancient society. Jesus sought out this woman the same way

he went out of his way to help the disabled, the destitute, and the diseased, not to mention children, who were not normally allowed to interact with adults, but with whom Jesus dearly loved to associate.

Here is a compressed version of what happens at the well:⁷ *When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, “Will you give me a drink?”* ⁹ *The Samaritan woman said to him, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?”* ¹⁰ *Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”* ¹¹ *“Sir,” the woman said, “you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water?”* ¹² *Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?”* ¹³ *Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”*

As it turns out, there is a conflict of sort between our two passages, the 4th Beatitude and Jesus’ remarks to the Samaritan woman at the well. Or, at least superficially, there seems to be a conflict. I’ll get back to this. But first, I want to talk about the science fiction novel *Dune*. It’s about a planet that consists entirely

of desert, where water is so scarce that people wear special suits to recycle the water from their bodies. (You do not want to hear any more details about this, trust me). The book is pseudo-religious and perhaps even offensive to some Christians. It is in truth more of a rip-off of Islam, though, than it is critical of Christianity. But it does rely heavily on a concept that says that religions can be deliberately planted among populations of unsophisticated people. What it doesn't do is recognize the beauty of having a spiritual foundation on which to base one's life. This book was written in 1965, won major sci fi awards, and has recently been made into a movie – but not for the first time. I told Wendy that I want to see this movie. The reason is because I enjoyed the book so much as a teenager. Here's the story. I grew up for the most part in Oxnard, on the coast, in Ventura County, just north of L.A. But the neighborhood had become somewhat dangerous, and my father was worried that I would eventually get hurt there. So, my parents decided to move away, in part to protect me. The problem was that the only place they could afford to buy a house was in a remote area, far inland, on the edge of the Mojave Desert. To me, it was an extreme letdown. We went from living near the ocean, which I dearly loved, to living in a desert. My first summer there I literally cooked an egg on the sidewalk. Our driveway was asphalt, and you had to cross it to come to or go from the front door; in the summer, your shoes would sink

into the soft tar. Your feet would go snap, snap as you walked. I absolutely hated it there. I had to adapt and find things to do besides hanging around outside. Nobody, not even kids, went outside in the summer. Everyone just hunkered down in their air-conditioned houses. The only place where I could find other kids was the neighborhood pool. I had just traded the entire Pacific Ocean for some tiny pool. I started reading a lot. Here is what I ended up doing, when I was sixteen – fifty years and a few months ago: I sat outside in the shade in my parents’ backyard, drinking ice water and reading *Dune*. It made poetic sense to me.

My most vivid memory is how much water I drank while I was reading this book. Only because I was very young did I not collapse from the well over a hundred-degree temperatures. The book is fairly long; it took me a week to read it, I think, and I sat there day after day, reading and drinking water and drinking water and drinking water. My mother would venture out into the heat every now and then for a few seconds to bring me another pitcher and see how the hell I was doing. That thirst I felt in the desert, sitting there was a lot like the thirst that Jesus and his contemporaries must have felt in the desert, except that they didn’t have an air-conditioned house to retreat into. They were stuck in the desert all the time, day and night. Here is what Isaiah says about the desert:

For the oppressive acts of ruthless people

are like the relentless heat of the desert.

It was indeed relentless for them. You can see why the metaphor of physical thirst representing spiritual thirst was so powerful for the people of the Bible. So, let's look at our two Bible quotes and the apparent conflict between them. The first one, from Matthew, quotes Jesus as saying: *"⁶Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."* The second one quotes Jesus as saying: *"whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst."* Thirst here refers to spiritual thirst, the need for a renewal of faith. But if those who are thirsty are the ones who are going to be fed spiritually and drinking spiritual water will mean that you will never again thirst, it sounds like each of us gets just one shot at having our spiritual needs met. Indeed, our second quote, from Matthew, suggests that we will never again thirst once we are filled with blessings that God has to offer. But if we'll never thirst again, our Beatitude says we're in trouble, because by being thirsty – this is how we receive God's blessing. We all have that sense that we need to stay open to Scripture, to the message of God, to continuously strengthening our faith. We all know that you don't listen to the Holy Spirit within you just once, respond positively, and then you are a-okay for life. You need to stay thirsty, don't you, all your life? Isn't that what our Beatitude tells us? This isn't quite true, though, making the apparent conflict disappear.

Here's the catch: Nothing says you can't continue to renew and grow your faith without being thirsty. That thirst is what gets us started. It puts us on the road. We don't have to feel obliged to be desperate, to be thirsty all the time. But we must be very, very thirsty - once. Then something inside us is ignited. We see the truth. We know that we never want to let go. We know we must stay on the right path. We want to learn more. We want to grow. We live within a continuous process of ongoing, never-ending sanctification. The big question for each of us is this: have we had that day of great thirst? Have we had that one time in the true desert, burning hot, desperately thirsty? Have we ever truly needed to feel the presence of God in our lives? We only need it once. But it must be the real thing. That's the question for each of us. It's never too late.

Psalms 143 comes near the end of the Book of Psalms. This song calls God to forgive and to give mercy. This Psalm tells us that no person is ever fully sanctified, fully righteous in the eyes of God. Obtaining salvation is a journey that continues all our lives. Here is the beginning of the Psalm:

*¹ Hear my prayer, O LORD;
listen to my plea!
Answer me because you are faithful and righteous.*

*² Don't put your servant on trial,
for no one is innocent before you.*

*³ My enemy has chased me.
He has knocked me to the ground*

and forces me to live in darkness like those in the grave.

⁴ I am losing all hope;

I am paralyzed with fear.

⁵ I remember the days of old.

I ponder all your great works

and think about what you have done.

⁶ I lift my hands to you in prayer.

I thirst for you as parched land thirsts for rain.

Maybe what's really true is that we only have to have that big thirst once, but although it is satisfied, the memory of it is so powerful, that the feeling never fully goes away. It's that recollection, that presence in our mind that will not fade that keeps us on that road toward God. We know that we will never become fully forgiving, that we will never get to a place where we treat all people as having been made in God's image, and we will never on this Earth give absolutely all of us over to God. We always hold a bit back. Please pray with me.

God, there was a time when each of us realized that we believed, that we wanted to follow in the footsteps of your son. Let us never forget that blazing thirst that you graciously satisfied. Each of us will always "thirst for you as parched land thirsts for rain." Amen.