

Sermon on the Mount

Message 10

Wealth and Worry

Matthew 6:19-34

The Challenge

Do you know anyone who is totally sold out for God? Someone who has completely turned his back on the world and is 100% devoted to following Christ? Someone who has sold his possessions, left his job, and spends his whole life serving God? Does this sound like a monk? Maybe you don't personally know such a person, but you might have heard of St. Francis of Assisi. He inherited a sizable fortune, but became convinced that serving God was better than wealth – so he sold his possessions, gave away his money to the poor, and entered a monastery. There are more recent examples of such devotion. C. T. Studd was a 19th century graduate of Cambridge University who came from a well-established family and had a bright future in front of him – but he abandoned it all and spent his whole life in Africa as a missionary. And I have known people who looked at the beginning and end of this passage and gave up everything for Christ. They read Jesus' warning, "Do not lay up for yourself treasures on earth..." and His command to "seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness," – and they quit school, gave away their goods, and spent their lives ministering to others.

Is that where this passage takes us? Will I end this study with the application that if you are really faithful to Christ, you will leave Lehigh, sell your music and computer and car, and minister to the poor or join a campus ministry full-time? Or shall we back off and find excuses for continuing in our present comfortable lifestyle? And what do you make of people, like myself, who own a house and cars and computers – yet claim to be trying, at least, to love Jesus with all our hearts? Are we self deceived, or just lying?

This is a challenging passage, and if we are honest, most of us water it down. Jesus calls us to an incredible level of commitment, and we feel it is too hard for ordinary people to achieve. In a sense we are relieved that there are monks like St. Francis, for they validate our feeling that only saints could live up to this passage. The trouble is that nothing in this passage indicates it is only for the spiritual elite. Jesus casts this teaching within the whole sermon on the mount – His vision for His Kingdom – for all His people at all times everywhere. No, it is impossible to apply this passage only to part of God's people.

But the problem with St. Francis and those like him is that they didn't understand this passage either. This passage has been misinterpreted to teach a number of false ideas – such as that saving is futile and wrong, or that the more you give to the church the more you love God. Some think this passage means we should not plan for the future, and that if we spend all our time in prayer, Bible study, and good deeds, God will give us food, clothing, shelter, and all our necessities. This is not what this passage teaches, and misconceptions such as these prevent us from truly understanding and fully following Jesus' teaching. And while we're lining up the difficulties in the passage, let's list the two most perplexing questions presented here. How is the eye the lamp of the body? And what is mammon?

But before we plunge into these, let's get some perspective. So far in His sermon Jesus has spent all of chapter 5 teaching on character. He explained the Old Testament law, showing the sort of character His followers must possess. Last week in the first half of chapter 6 He discussed piety. He taught us how to pray, fast, and do good deeds in a genuine, unhypocritical way. Now in the second half of chapter 6 He teaches us the life goals of His followers. Tonight's passage is about the overall direction of your life.

What are you living for?

What are you living for? What is your life goal? What if you were a communist, or an Olympic

athlete, or a politician or businessman? What if you were a Zionist or a Muslim? For a true communist, communism is much more than an economic system. It is a complete philosophy of life, its goal is world domination. Til the end, communist regimes were committed to making the whole world communist. An Olympic athlete does not work out merely to keep in shape – like I try to do. He trains all day long, day after day because his goal is the gold medal. Many politicians and businessmen are not in it for public service or to provide for their families, but they are determined to rise to the top, to get to the position of greatest power – and they are focused day and night on that goal. The Zionist is determined that the Jewish state shall prosper, and he is willing to die for that cause – and al Qaida is just as determined to stamp out western influence and impose Islamic law all over the world.

You see, the point is that your goal in life influences everything. If your goal is to wipe out western influence and establish the global Islamic Caliphate, you will study, train, work, and prepare for a life devoted to this cause. Islam becomes your master, as you submit everything in your life to its teaching – just as the communist serves communist ideology, and the athlete serves his sport. In this passage Jesus asks you this question, Who is *your* master? The heart of this passage is the question of which master you will serve. We can find out who your master is by observing what you are devoted to. Some Christians are devoted to wealth, some to popularity, some to pleasure – and although they claim to follow Christ, Christ is not their master. Who is your master?

Jesus begins by breaking this question down into a simple binary choice. Are you seeking earthly treasure or heavenly treasure? What do you value most in life? What are you working hardest for? Earthly treasures are those things which are present on earth and can be obtained by hard work on earth – like a military or political victory, a gold medal, a computer, a car, a career, a wife, or a comfortable life composed of all of these. Heavenly treasures, on the other hand, are those things which are in heaven and cannot be gained merely by hard work here on earth – such as salvation, and a relationship with God. Now note that those things we are calling earthly treasures are not bad in themselves. And note also that this passage is not, as some have misunderstood, a call to irresponsibility. Jesus is not overthrowing the godly counsel found in Proverbs, for example where we can read the following in chapter 6, verses 6-11.

Go to the ant, you sluggard! Consider her ways and be wise,
Which, having no captain, Overseer or ruler,
Provides her supplies in the summer, *And* gathers her food in the harvest.
How long will you slumber, O sluggard? When will you rise from your sleep?
A little sleep, a little slumber, A little folding of the hands to sleep –
So shall your poverty come on you like a prowler, And your need like an armed man.

The practical responsibility to take care of your own physical needs is found throughout the New Testament as well. For example in 1 Timothy 5:8 we read, “if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.” Furthermore, earthly treasure can be useful as a *means* to the heavenly treasure. This is the message of the Parable of the Unjust Steward which you can find in Luke chapter 16.

The key phrase in Jesus’ teaching here is “for yourself”. It is foolish to lay up treasure *for yourself*, but it is wise and godly to lay up treasure, even earthly treasure, for *God’s* use. A good father will provide for his children, and Proverbs 13:22 says, “A good man leaves an inheritance to his children's children.” What he is *not* doing is laying up treasure for a dream house or lavish vacations or a sumptuous retirement. A reliable car is a big help is doing the Lord’s work, and a decent house is important in rearing a family. It’s a matter of being *provident* versus being *covetous*. Do you seek earthly goods for your pleasure, or for the service of God? Jesus points out the foolishness of pursuing your own pleasure – because all those things which you so long for are easily lost or destroyed. Furthermore, if you are seeking earthly wealth, you will

never be satisfied. You will always want a little more. But if you are seeking heavenly treasure, none of your efforts will go unrewarded.

Clearly, your life goal is a matter of supreme importance. But how can you tell what you are living for? Jesus tells us – by what you look at! As the body follows the eye, so the soul follows the mind’s eye. Remember when you were learning to drive? Your driving instructor told you always to keep looking straight ahead, because if you look to the side, you will begin to drive to the side. Your body follows your eye. What kind of person would consistently walk where he cannot see? And if you cannot see well, you endanger your self and others. That is why so many of us wear glasses. Likewise, if the eye of your soul is flawed (i.e. you dwell on wrong things) you will be led to evil. So what do you look at? What do you think about as you go through the day? Girls? Guys? Computers? Cars? Why are you thinking about these things? If you are looking at these things, you will live for them. Your life will be drawn to them, and they will be your master!

God vs. Mammon

Lest there be any ambiguity, Jesus makes it absolutely clear that if something else is your master, He is not. Or to say it in reverse, if you call Jesus your master, other desires cannot dominate your life. It is possible to hold down two or three jobs, but a slave is not a free employee – he is owned by his master. Obviously, a slave cannot be owned by two masters. And even if such a situation were possible, he would be torn between faithfulness to one or the other. By definition, a master has an exclusive claim over his slave. “Men can work for two employers, but no slave can be the property of two owners.”¹

Jesus applies this principle by saying you cannot serve both God and mammon. Each demands complete loyalty, and anything less will be viewed as treason. Mammon is an Aramaic word which refers to money, but it has a personal quality to it. Mammon is the money god. It is the personification of money, and Jesus uses this term to highlight the power that earthly treasures have over us. Money is not merely a means of exchange. Earthly treasure has an almost personal ability to captivate us. Like a slave trader, it seeks the unwary and brings them under his power. You cannot pursue both God and earthly wealth because both demand total allegiance. If you try to live for wealth, it will enslave you and you will be forced to do its bidding. Jesus is saying here that the pursuit of money, or popularity, or possessions, or pleasure will capture your soul. You will be drawn away from God and eventually you will be unable to serve him at all. Mammon will triumph and rule supreme. It is impossible to follow God while seeking earthly treasure. But the reverse is also true. If you seek to serve God, His mastery over you grows and you are less swayed by the lure of earthly treasure. The more you follow Christ the more secure His rule in your life, and Mammon will be defeated in his desire to dominate you. The principle at work here is that devotion to one master means freedom from slavery and fear of the others. And Jesus’ position is that if He is not lord of all, he is not lord at all. He considers partial loyalty treason.

Serving God

But what will become of us if we turn our backs on Mammon and serve God? Where will we get food to eat and clothes to wear if we are so air-headed to focus our lives on God? Mammon is whispering in your ear that you cannot survive without food, clothing, and shelter. He provides these necessities, remember? You need money to buy food at the store, to buy clothes, and to pay the rent. If you rebel against Mammon, you will perish. He provides for you, so you must serve him. These are the lies you hear all day, every day. They are very powerful and extremely persuasive. But God destroys their power with a strong blast of the truth.

¹ Stott.

The truth is that God is your provider. He gave you life in the beginning, and He will sustain you to the end. Mammon is a liar and a fraud. He does not provide for you, He only takes credit for God's loving care. Jesus proves this point by reminding us that God takes wonderful care of the plants and animals. Obviously we are more valuable than plants and animals, so if God is faithful to them, there can be no doubt He will be faithful to us. Furthermore, God is our father, and like any father, He cares for His children. In the next chapter when Jesus urges us to pray, He points out that no father denies his children the necessities of life. On a less serious level think of your pets. You are not their father(!), but they are yours and you take good care of them. If we, weak and forgetful human beings are faithful to our pets, how much more will God take care of all our needs!

Jesus argues further in verse 32 that worry about earthly needs is pagan. This characterizes non-Christians, but is entirely inconsistent in God's people. The vision of His Kingdom Jesus paints has no worry in it for material needs. Furthermore, worry is foolish because it accomplishes nothing. Worrying about your needs and wants does not do a single thing to meet them. It drains your emotional energy and wastes your time. Finally, worry betrays a lack of trust in God and His goodness. We usually do not rank worry as a big sin. The big ones are murder, adultery, theft – but worry, in fact, seldom makes the list at all. But you see, to go though life worrying is in essence to say, “Yes, I know God says He will take care of me. But – I don't buy it. I do not think I can trust Him to come through for me.” In reality, worry is a horrible insult to God.

At last Jesus gives us the positive direction our lives should take. Abandon earthly treasure, rebel against Mammon, forsake worry – and seek God's Kingdom. When Jesus says we should seek God's Kingdom, He has much more in mind than pious acts, although they are certainly included. He could have said to pursue piety, or to pursue holiness – in fact He concluded chapter five by giving perfection to the law as our goal. But here He deliberately chose to point us toward His Kingdom because life consists of much more than prayer and Bible study. If Jesus is to be your master, He will rule over all dimensions of your life – and if you are to follow Him, you will participate in His Kingdom. And a kingdom, by definition, embraces all of life.

To seek God's Kingdom means to do everything for God, not for your self. It means that you seek God's interests in your family life, your friendships, your sex life, your vocation – even your leisure time. When you go home for Thanksgiving, you do not wonder how to have a good time. Instead, you ask God how to minister to your parents and siblings and friends. You do not go looking for friendships which will make you feel good – you look for people whom God will use in your life, and you in theirs. You do not seek sexual pleasure, but ask God for a Christian husband or wife and wait for His provision. You try to find a vocation in which your God-given skills can be used to serve God and man. And even in your free time, you try to use it for God's purposes. You do not ask, “How can I have fun this weekend,” but “How can I serve God this weekend?” Now perhaps you do need a break from your toil this weekend, perhaps even some extra sleep. But if you are seeking God's Kingdom, you will not sleep because it feels good – you will sleep because it will refresh you to serve God better. You will choose recreational activities which will benefit you and also enable you to minister to others.

The Gospel

So now we return to the question we posed at the beginning – What are you living for? What is your life goal? Are you at Lehigh to pursue the American Dream – a stable career, wife, 1.5 children, 2.5 TV sets, and three cars? Are you seeking a respectable life like your peers? Or are you devoted to Jesus' Kingdom? Is your career a goal in itself, or a means of advancing Jesus' Kingdom? Are you looking for a husband or wife so that you can get sex and companionship, or so that you can build God's Kingdom more effectively? Are you willing to suffer persecution for Jesus, as the eighth beatitude said you would, or are you committed to a comfortable life? Which God are you serving – Jesus or Mammon? Remember, you cannot serve both.

How you answer these question will determine the course of your life. For the first time you have the opportunity in college to make your own decisions about the direction of your life. Think carefully about your decisions, and ask yourself, honestly, who are you really serving?

By now you may be annoyed or even angry with me for shining the spotlight on you so brightly. Is this the love of Jesus, to harass people about their life goals and daily decisions? Isn't Jesus about the gospel, about love and forgiveness? Why are you so demanding? First, I invite you to see if I am any more demanding than Jesus. Read this passage again and let Jesus speak to you. And yes, Jesus does love us. That is why He warns us so strongly not to worship another god. Mammon is evil and slippery. It is easy to get caught in his grasp. If you think you can pursue a comfortable life and still serve Jesus, you are wrong – and someday you will bitterly regret the choices you make now. It is love that moves Jesus to issue these strong warnings. And yes again, Jesus does forgive. Jesus will forgive you even if you sin 70 times seven. But by then your life may be a shambles.

The gospel is that Jesus calls us who do not deserve Him to be His followers. The gospel is that Jesus forgives us when we stray. The gospel is that Jesus gives us the power to obey, even when we hardly want to. The gospel is that you may participate in the glorious Kingdom of your beautiful Lord and Savior. The gospel is that you are invited to a better life than a comfortable existence. The gospel is a call to abandon the American Dream and pursue the vision of Jesus' Kingdom.

We are not animals. We are not here on earth to serve our gut and our hormones. We are part of a great Kingdom and have important work to do. Christ calls you to forsake Mammon. Abandon the foolish pursuit of earthly treasures. Cease worrying and follow Christ in all you do. As you serve Christ in all your life with all your heart, His Kingdom grows and God provides for our needs. The final question God puts before you tonight is this: which God do you really serve, every hour of every day?

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