

First Things First

King of Heaven: The King's Authority

Matthew 6:19-34

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When I was in my early twenties, beginning a career in business, I was introduced to books on productivity. I continue to be interested in these kinds of books, even after transitioning into ministry. One of the first books I read was Stephen Covey's, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*.

I still think about his second and third habits regularly. The second habit is to "begin with the end in mind." Covey says all highly effective people begin their planning with a clear vision of their desired future. They think about the type of people they want to be and where they want to end up in life.

But they don't simply live in the clouds of imagination. If they want to arrive at their desired destination, they need to move on to the next habit; they need to "put first things first." The "first things" are the things that need to happen to make progress toward our goals. And the highly effective person will put these first things in their calendar first. They won't allow the urgent demands and unimportant distractions to crowd out time for making progress toward the most important things in their life.

Stephen Covey's not a Christian; he's a Mormon. But I see something similar in the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount gives us a vision for the desired future of Jesus' disciples. We don't come up with it on our own! Jesus gives us a picture of what the life of a citizen of the kingdom of heaven looks like. A vision of the good life in the Beatitudes. A call to a greater righteousness than that of the scribes and the Pharisees. It's a picture of a person whose inner life and outer life are integrated.

Jesus does more than paint a picture. He also calls us to live into that vision. In our passage this morning, he literally calls us to put first things first. To seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

He's not necessarily talking about the way we schedule our week. He's not talking about personal productivity. He's talking about what's first in our hearts. He's calling us to make the priorities of the kingdom of heaven our heart priorities so that our hearts won't be dominated by the urgent demands and unimportant distractions of this earth.

Matthew 6:19–34¹

¹⁹*"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal,*
²⁰*but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

²²*"The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, ²³but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!"*

²⁴*"No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.*

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

²⁵“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? ²⁸And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. ³⁰But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? ³¹Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ³²For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. ³³But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

³⁴“Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.”

This is the Word of the Lord.

This passage is divided into two distinct, yet related sections. The first, in verses 19-24, is about money. The second, in verses 25-34 is about worry. Each section has a set of two commands. One command is negative; it tells us what not to do. And the second is a corrective command; it tells us what we need to do.² And the whole passage is really summarized in verse 33: “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”

What I want to do this morning is to walk through these two sections and then at the end show how these two distinct sections are related and work together.

UNDIVIDED DEVOTION (19-24)

Let’s begin with the first section. The two commands in this section call us to what Mike Bullmore calls undiluted devotion to God.³ I’d rephrase that a bit. I’d say, in these verses, Jesus is calling his disciples to an undivided devotion to God and the priorities of the kingdom of heaven.

Why do I say that? Jesus gives us a metaphor in verses 22-23, which summarize his commands in verses 19-21. Jesus says, “The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness.”

What does Jesus mean by your eye being healthy? The eye here, I believe, is parallel with the heart in verse 21. “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” So, he’s talking about the heart. But he uses the metaphor of the eye because he’s talking about focus. His concern is what our heart is focused on. The word translated as healthy is difficult to translate. But it basically means singular.⁴

I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but Pastor Mike has some really thick glasses. It’s not just because he’s super nearsighted. It’s because he has significant problems with double vision. So, he has a lot of prism in his glasses to deal with that double vision. To help him have singular vision.

I think that’s what Jesus is talking about. He’s using a metaphor here to summarize his whole argument in verses 19-24. If your heart is healthy it will be singularly focused on the priorities of the

² Douglas Sean O’Donnell, *Matthew: All Authority in Heaven and on Earth*

³ Mike Bullmore, “[Undiluted Devotion, Unworried Trust](#)”

⁴ D. A. Carson, “Matthew” in *Matthew, Mark, Luke*, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary; Jonathan T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount*

kingdom of heaven. It will be undivided in devotion to God. It will lay up treasures in heaven not on earth. It will serve God not money.

That's the call. But Jesus gives more than a set of commands here. He also tells us why we should obey his commands. Like a wise sage, he uses illustrations from the world to drive his point home. He gives three reasons for his commands.

You Can't Take It with You

The first reason for undivided commitment to the kingdom of heaven could be summarized in the old adage, you can't take it with you when you go. Jesus says don't lay up for yourselves treasures on earth. Instead, he says lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven. And the reason for this singular focus on treasures in heaven is because the treasures of this earth are fleeting. But the treasures of heaven are eternal. Treasures on earth are money and anything money can buy. He wants us to see that they won't last.

In preaching team this week, Abdel brought up the treasures found in King Tut's tomb. Another pastor used a similar example and spoke of the Pyramids in Egypt.⁵ The Pyramids are one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. King Tut's treasures are marvelous. But all of these wonderful things were built on utter folly: the belief that an Egyptian king could take their riches with them into the afterlife. But clearly they didn't, or we wouldn't be marveling at them today! If we should learn anything from these artifacts from Egypt it's the lesson that you can't take it with you when you go.

But as Abdel said, you can send it forward ahead of you. Those who seek the kingdom of heaven will have treasures in heaven. Those who belong to Christ have an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you (1 Pet. 1:4). We shouldn't let the unimportant and fading distractions of this world keep us from our singular focus on God's kingdom.

You Can't See Clearly with a Greedy Eye

The second reason for undivided commitment to the kingdom of heaven is because you can't see clearly with a greedy eye. In verse 22 Jesus talks about a healthy, focused eye. In verse 23 he talks about a bad eye or an evil eye. In our day, we talk about giving someone the evil eye when we're upset with them. In Jesus' day, an evil eye was an eye that was covetous or envious.⁶ Jesus says that when you have an evil eye, you will be full of darkness. In other words, if you're focused on your own selfish pursuits of money and possessions, your vision of heavenly priorities and God's kingdom will be completely obstructed. And nothing should cloud our vision of our desired future!

You Can't Serve Two Masters

The third reason for an undivided heart is because you can't serve two masters. This may strike you as somewhat inaccurate. Many of you have had more than one job. And so, you've served two bosses. But Jesus isn't talking about employment here. He's talking about slavery. A slave master owns their slave. And they won't allow you to serve another master.⁷ That's the metaphor here. Jesus is saying it's impossible to have two masters. You can't be divided.

⁵ O'Donnell

⁶ Carson; Pennington

⁷ Pennington

He's not saying you can't have possessions. He's not saying you shouldn't work. Or that you can't make investments or have bank accounts. That would contradict other teaching in the Bible.⁸ He's saying you can't serve these earthly things and serve God at the same time. You can't set your heart on money and on God. You can't treasure both. If you belong to the kingdom of God, you need to give undivided attention to God.

Now at this point, Jesus' disciples may be thinking, we get your point, we're with you. We see the vision you're laying out and we're on board. But Jesus keeps teaching. He goes on to the next section of his sermon.

It's as if he's saying let's test where your heart is. Let's get down to brass tacks. Let's talk about worry or anxiety, because everyone who loves money will be filled with anxiety about money. It's almost as if he's saying what you worry about is where your heart is. Do you concern yourself with the priorities of the kingdom of heaven or the priorities of earth?

UNWORRIED TRUST (25-34)

So, let's turn now to the next two sets of commands. The negative command is very explicit and emphatic in verses 25-34. We're told three times, "Do not be anxious" (vv. 25, 31, 34). The corrective command is not explicit, but I believe it's implied. It's basically a command to trust God. So, we're not only called to undivided commitment to the priorities of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus is calling his disciples to unworried trust in God.⁹ An un-anxious confidence in God's ability to meet our needs on earth.

And just like the first set of commands, Jesus doesn't simply give us commands. He also gives us three reasons why we can have unworried trust in God. And again, he draws on examples from the created world. He draws on wisdom to ground our confidence in him.

Worry Is Unproductive

Doug O'Donnell says, the first reason to not worry is that worry is unproductive. Notice Jesus asks a question in verse 27: "And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?" The actual language here says something like, "And which of you by being anxious can add *a cubit* to his life span." A cubit is the distance from your elbow to your fingertips.¹⁰

I have a couple of eleven-year-old boys living in my house. And, as many eleven-year-old boys, they love to play sports and wish they were taller, faster, and stronger. They also love to eat. And I think they actually believe that the more they eat the taller they'll get. Eating may help them to put on weight, but I don't think it will do much if anything to make them taller. Sometimes when they're eating me out of house and home, I want to say to them, "Which of you by eating more chips thinks it will add a single inch to his height!"

That's what Jesus is saying. Worry won't make you grow a cubit taller in years! Worrying won't do anything to deal with the things you're worrying *about*. If anything, worrying will shrink your life span. It's completely unproductive to worry. That's the first reason.

⁸ O'Donnell

⁹ Bullmore

¹⁰ R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament

Worry Is Unnecessary

The second reason to not worry but trust God, is because worry is unnecessary.¹¹ Jesus asks another question in verse 28: “And why are you anxious about clothing?” Earlier he talked about food. Here he’s talking about clothing. And after each topic, he uses an illustration.

In verse 26 he says look at the birds of the air. They don’t have planters or combines, they don’t have barns or grain elevators to store their food. And yet, your heavenly Father feeds them. In verse 28 he says, “Consider the lilies of the field.” Literally, he’s talking about the wildflowers. I think wildflowers are the most beautiful flowers. And they just grow without gardening, fertilizing, weeding, etc. And not even Solomon was ever dressed as well as them.

And here’s the point. We’re so much more valuable to God than birds or flowers. So, how much more can we trust God to feed us and to clothe us!

Now, I think it’s important to point out that this passage is not speaking about living in luxury. God is not promising to provide all we want. He’s promising to provide what we need. So, it’s unnecessary to worry about these things.

Worry Is Unworthy

The third reason to not worry is because worry is unworthy.¹² It’s unworthy of our relationship with God. The Gentiles worry about what they’ll eat and drink and wear (vv. 31-32). But they don’t believe in the God of the Bible, who is called our heavenly Father. It’s as if they think he’s a meanie to be manipulated. That’s why they pray like they do (6:7). And that’s why they worry like they do. But if we belong to Jesus, the Son of God, then God is our heavenly Father. And he knows what we need before we even ask. And so, he calls us to not worry, but to ask him for what we need. To pray, “Give us this day our daily bread.”

My wife will be the first to admit that her main struggle in life is with worry. But she has taken that weakness and developed it into a strength. She’s developed a prayer life that takes the distraction of worry and turns it into a focus on God in prayer. That’s one way to practically deal with the call to not worry and the call to trust. You go to God in prayer. Worry is unworthy of our relationship with God. Prayer is how we trust God.

There’s another reason why worry is unworthy. Jesus asks another question in verse 25: “Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?” I think this is the key question in the whole passage. It goes back to where we started. We have to begin with the end in mind. What do we really want for our lives? What’s our life really all about at a heart level? It’s not that food and clothing aren’t important. It’s just that there’s something much more important. “Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?” Yes, there is so much more! That’s the point. The kingdom of heaven is so much more than the things of this earth.¹³

That’s why Jesus summarizes the whole by saying, “But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”

¹¹ O’Donnell

¹² O’Donnell

¹³ O’Donnell

At the beginning of this sermon, I said I was going to walk through each part of this passage and then show how the distinctive parts fit together. That's what Jesus is doing in verse 33. He showing us how it all fits together.

Jesus doesn't just say, "Don't worry." He doesn't just say, "Stop it!" He tells us *how* to not worry. The way we stop worrying about the things of this earth is by giving ourselves to undivided devotion to the kingdom of heaven.¹⁴ To quote the hymn—we turn our eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face. And then the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of his glory and grace.

The way we stop worrying is by seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. What are God's kingdom priorities? What is his righteousness? They are the things Jesus has been talking about throughout the sermon.

First is the fact that Jesus came to save his people from their sins. And we put his kingdom first when we go to the nations with the gospel of Jesus' work on the cross to save sinners. We put his kingdom first when we then make disciples who will live their lives according to all he has commanded us.

But we don't just make converts. Jesus calls us to reorient our whole lives according to his kingdom. He calls us to not worry about food, but to hunger and thirst after righteousness. He tells us that man doesn't live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from God's mouth. We obey all he has taught us. We pursue righteousness when we live before an audience of one, not man. We pursue righteousness when our lives on the outside match our hearts on the inside. When we put away anger and lust. When we put away division and pursue love. When we, as citizens of the kingdom, seek to be formed into the image of the King.

I began by quoting from a book by Stephen Covey. I'll end by referencing a similar book by Dale Carnegie called *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living*.

How do you stop worrying? You start living for the kingdom of God.

¹⁴ Bullmore

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