

Keep the Kingdom First

Matthew 6:19-34

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Good morning everyone! It is my privilege to be able to share from God's word with you today. Today, we are going to be diving into and learning from the latter half of Matthew 6. Now, Matthew 6 is the middle chapter of one of the most famous sections of Scripture, the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is speaking to crowds in the Galilean region and to his disciples in Roman-occupied Israel. In the sermon so far, Jesus has taught about the characteristics God blesses, an expansion of the OT laws, and instructions for giving, praying, and fasting in a way that is honouring to God. At this point, Jesus now turns to the topic of money and its intersection with worry and anxiety. The dance between these two things, money and anxiety, has been in existence since we decided to assign value to items and coins. It is no less relevant today; maybe you're here today, and you are feeling exhausted, scared, or overwhelmed by all the talk about tariffs and their effect on the economy. Perhaps you're here today, and you've been saving and saving to buy a house, and you can't seem to keep up with the market, or maybe you're here and are totally unsure of what you should do in light of all the change happening. Take heart, and hear the words of Jesus, which are just as relevant to us today as they were to the Galileans and disciples who first heard them almost two thousand years ago, and hear the heart behind Jesus' teachings. Please follow along with me in your Bibles as I read from **Matthew 6:19-34 (NIV)**. This is the Word of the Lord.

Where are you storing your treasure? What are you letting into your mind? Who are you serving? These are the questions implicit in the first five verses of our passage. Jesus is holistically challenging us to pause and reflect on these questions, to look at what we are putting our hope and trust in. He emphasizes this point in his summary of this section in verses 32-33. In verse 32, Jesus reminds us that the pagans "run after" all these things. Now the word that is translated as "run after" is the word ἐπιζητέω (eh-pee-zay-teh-oh); it's a combination of the

words ἐπί (eh-pee), which means “intensifying” and ζητέω (zay-the-o) which means “seek.” Meaning that it is something they are intensely seeking. There’s a franticness being communicated here, a way that does not bring peace but only worry. Store your treasures on earth; you have vermin, thieves, and rust to worry about. Look at darkness, and it corrupts and consumes your whole body. Try to serve God and money, and you’ll end up bitter and hateful. Jesus is teaching us that the way of trying to do things on our own will only lead to fear, worry, and persistent anxiety. Nothing is secure, safe, or steadfast in a world corrupted by sin. We are constantly forced to be worried about what could go wrong. As the commentator Rodney Reeves put it,

“Anxiety only makes us miserable in the present. Even though we know these things, we will persist in our habit of worry – some of us more than others – to the detriment of ourselves and other people. Of course, worry is seated in fear. **We only fret what could hurt us.** (I never worry while I anticipate good things. “Oh no I hope the great bonus in pay won’t ruin me.”) – Rodney Reeves, *Story of God Commentary Series: Matthew* (emphasis added)

Intensely seeking to ensure we have everything figured out, to have plans for every contingency possible, or to stockpile enough excess to cover any catastrophe. More. More. And more. With all of this, you end up with a life consumed with the busyness of anxiety, and it drains us, and it can rob us of the life we are supposed to have.

I learned this in a frightening way early in my twenties. I wasn’t always a Pastor; I’m relatively new to the position. I spent the first decade of my adult life in law enforcement and worked as a court security and prisoner transport Sheriff for the government of Alberta from May 2014 to December 2023. I learned this particular lesson less than a month after finishing my

recruit class training. I was assigned to work in the Edmonton Court House cell block for my on-the-job training. Daily, I was interacting with dozens and dozens of prisoners firsthand – those in jail for everything from theft to murder. Being a new recruit, I was always on high alert. I mean, I just had spent the last three months getting every worst-case scenario thrown at me and told always to be ready for the worst, and so I was. Every step, every little interaction, every little twitch, gesture, movement of the hands – I observed, analyzed, and mentally prepared for a fight. My mind was constantly busy for every minute of every shift. I put all this on myself; I didn't rely on my mentor, coworkers, or sergeant. I felt as if I alone had to be on high alert, and it literally almost killed me.

On a Friday afternoon, on my commute home after spending a week working in cells, I started to doze. I pushed it to the side and ignored it, as I had to get home as soon as possible to get to my second job (a waiter) on time cause I wanted to save as much money as possible. The constant worry and anxiety about the job, which fueled the desire to keep my university job while starting my career, was unsustainable. I pushed myself to the limits, and on that Friday afternoon on a two-lane highway travelling at over 100km/h, I momentarily fell asleep at the wheel and swerved into oncoming traffic. To this day, I credit this to God protecting me because I don't remember hearing a horn or seeing the car coming the other way; all I remember is regaining consciousness and pulling the wheel sharp to the right to avoid a head-on collision narrowly.

Where are you storing your treasure? What are you letting into your mind? Who are you serving? I was storing my treasure in what I could buy, allowing the worst thoughts of every person I saw every day to enter my soul and trying to serve myself, money, and God simultaneously and ultimately failing them all. It likely doesn't deal with prisoners working two

jobs at the same time, but the principles that Jesus warned against apply to us all. Today, we are constantly encouraged to do, buy, consume, and always be busy and anxious. We are told we can have everything, and in chasing everything, we are left with nothing and get broken by worry and anxiety. The Greek word translated as worry/anxiety, μέριμνα (mer-eem-nah), is derived from the Greek word μερίζω (mer-ree-zoh), which means “to divide or separate.” Anxiety and worry separate us from peace and divide our attention, time, and resources.

Thankfully, Jesus steps in and teaches his disciples, the Galilean crowds, and us today the simple, but not necessarily easy, answer. *“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”* (Matt. 6:33 NIV). Store your treasure in God’s kingdom, look at righteousness, and serve a God who takes care of even the birds and flowers, so he will surely take care of you. No contingencies, no back-ups, no “break-in-case-of-emergency.” Simply seek God’s kingdom first. The renowned 19th-century Christian philosopher Soren Kierkegaard makes the following statement on this principle:

“God’s kingdom can only be sought when it is sought first; he who does not seek God’s kingdom first does not seek it at all. . . . There stands man with many things before his eyes which he would seek - then [Christ] addresses him and says, “seek first God’s kingdom.” Then man thinks, “All right, if afterwards I am permitted to seek something else, I may as well begin by seeking God’s kingdom.’ If then he really begins with this, [Christ] knows very well what the consequence will be, namely, that he will become so content and satisfied with this seeking that he entirely forgets to seek anything else - so that it now becomes true that he seeks solely and only God’s kingdom.” (modified to replace instances of “the Gospel” with “Christ” for clarity)

Simply seek God's kingdom first, and then everything else will fall to the wayside. That is the heart of what Jesus is teaching in this section.

Don't store up your treasure on earth, but seek God's kingdom first and store your treasure in heaven. Don't look at the things that pollute, but seek God's kingdom first and keep your eyes on the world's light. Don't try to serve God AND money, God AND fame, or God AND "insert anything else here," but seek God's kingdom first. The apostle Paul compares our lives to a race, and every race is defined by its finish line, the goal every single person is trying to reach. Jesus is proclaiming the finish line we are all to run after, which is God's kingdom. We are to discipline our lives to the rhythm of simplicity; as Richard Foster, in his book *The Celebration of Discipline*, comments,

“The central point of the Discipline of simplicity is to seek the kingdom of God and the righteousness of his kingdom first and then everything necessary will come in its proper order. . . . Everything hinges upon maintaining the “first” thing as first. Nothing must come before the kingdom of God, **including the desire for a simple life-style.**”
(emphasis added)

I emphasize the last point to make a much-needed caution. As Jesus has done throughout the Sermon on the Mount, he is speaking against legalism and focuses on the heart, and this passage is no different. This is not a message from Jesus to get rid of everything, to stop caring, to become ascetic and apathetic. This message challenges us to think about what finish line we are heading towards. In all of our busyness, amongst all of the noise, in the chaos of not knowing what tomorrow brings – what today are we fixing our eyes upon? In this, we see a connection to this passage as a further understanding of one of the ten commandments, as we've seen Jesus do already in the Sermon on the Mount, “*You shall have no other gods before me.*” (Exodus 20:3

NIV) It's not the thing that is sinful, but if we orient our hearts towards it, that's when it becomes a little "g" god in our lives. Money is needed to live and can be used for God's kingdom, but if we seek after it first, it is now a god. Simplicity itself can fall into this if we focus so much on trying to be simple that we no longer seek God's kingdom first; it is now a god. The question that Jesus is encouraging us to be asking continually is, "how is this seeking after God's kingdom."

As D.A. Carson, in his commentary, teaches on this passage,

"Jesus' disciples are not simply to refrain from the pursuit of temporal things as their primary goal in order to differentiate themselves from pagans; instead, they are to replace such pursuits with goals of far greater significance. To seek first the kingdom is to desire above all to enter into, submit to, and participate in spreading the news of the saving reign of God, the messianic kingdom already inaugurated by Jesus, and to live so as to store up treasures in heaven in the prospect of the kingdom's consummation."

Seeking first God's kingdom provides us all with a clarity of purpose and direction; that is how it defeats anxiety and worry. It does not mean a life free from difficulty, but it provides the strength and resolve to know God is with us when we seek his kingdom first. Jesus himself models this for us; he lived a simple life – whereas he came to fulfill the mission set out for him by God. Later on in Matthew, in the Garden of Gethsemane, just before being arrested and sent to the cross, we read Jesus' prayer, "*My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.*" (Matt. 26:39b) and again "*My Father, if it's not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.*" (Matt. 26:42b) Christ, in these verses, demonstrates for us the balance we are to strike in seeking after God's kingdom when faced with trials and tribulations. We are to give our concerns and worries over to God, but

we must submit first to God's kingdom and His will in all things. To live simply is not to be simple but to have a clear understanding of what we are to be seeking.

In all this, we can know through the love displayed by Jesus Christ, who lived simply to follow the kingdom plan set out for him and, in doing so, died in our place on the cross to atone for our sins. Then he conquered death by rising again and ascending to heaven and reminds us that he is coming again! Take heart and know that with that knowledge, whatever worries, doubts, anxieties, and fears you are facing, we have a simple stronghold to seek after, and at that is God's kingdom and righteousness. Amen!

Close in prayer – Psalm 62