

## **“Strive First”**

Matthew 6:24-34

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Matthew 6:24-34

“No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look 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? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. “So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.

Prayer.

One could easily read over this Biblical passage and be left with the impression that this text is for lightweights. It is about anxiety and stress, very important topics, mind you, but hardly the content of the Prince of Peace, the Messiah, the Son of God. It would be easy to say, “What does Jesus know about anxiety? He is a single man living a carefree life on the sunny beach in Galilee.”

Oh, if this text were simply about anxiety. I’d cite the statistics from the national Mental Health Association that there are an estimated 40 million who suffer from anxiety disorders, that is more than 13 percent of the population, two-thirds of whom have never been assessed, diagnosed, or treated by a physician; yet, these people suffer needlessly because treatment today is highly effective.<sup>1</sup>

But there is more here than meets the eye.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nmha.org/go/get-info/>

As we allow this text to wash over us it is helpful to be mindful of the fact that society has changed a great deal since the time of Jesus. Our understanding of poverty, wealth, and the good life are very different than they were then.<sup>2</sup>

Today we are submerged in a consumer driven environment. Advertising, marketing, media, even friends and family, are all telling us to consume. We are led to believe that the good life and happiness comes to those who buy the latest, greatest barbeque grill, the largest house, or sexiest car. Conversely, our economy is tanking; and every evening on the news we hear about financial tragedy, home foreclosures, crude topping \$135 per barrel, the weakening dollar, being stuck in Iraq, and the stock market plunging.

Anxiety is a tightrope we carefully walk. We seek the balance of security and stability, at the same time, we know that the very next step can bring about a disastrous fall. Every one of us are one heartbeat or one paycheck away from homelessness (or worse).

“Why should we care?” this passage leads us to believe. God will take care of us. No need to work hard; God will provide. Don’t even bother with the grocery shopping; he’ll take care of that, too. Our text suggests that we can simply relax and be happy.

But that doesn’t match with what we know. Our experience tells us otherwise. Society expects hard work out of everybody. The Protestant Work Ethic tells us that those who work hard are rewarded, and those who sluff off, well, those are the ones who live on the margins.

There is more to life than “Don’t worry. Be happy.” There is more here than meets the eye.

The key to unlocking this passage is found in the close of the preceding section, which serve as the first two sentences in today’s text. We can not serve God and wealth.

Jesus is teaching the crowds in this extension of his sermon on the mountain<sup>3</sup> not to abandon our lives, our stuff or our accumulations. He isn’t suggesting that we move to the desert, take a vow of poverty, or join a monastery. “Rather, he is addressing the basis for excessive worry and anxiety that can result from a life separated from

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<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to Dr. Richard Beaton, Associate Professor of New Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, CA for his inspiring reflections on this passage.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 5:1

God.”<sup>4</sup> As his disciples, gathered at his feet, learning the ways and will of our Lord, Jesus Christ, we are being told that we are called to a different set of values and priorities than the rest of the world. **We are called to wholehearted devotion to God.**

We are not called to God and country. We are not called to divided devotion to God and family; or to God, family, and country. We are called wholly, signally, there-is-no-other firsts, there-is-no sharing the spotlight; we are called to devotion only to God.

Money and stuff are so temporal. Politics and nationalism are so of this world. How many times have the governments of Europe changed in our lifetime? In the past one thousand years, how many times have the borders of North America changed? And a thousand years are as a moment in the mind of God. The Psalmist cites:

*For a thousand years in your sight  
are like yesterday when it is past,  
or like a watch in the night.*<sup>5</sup>

Christianity is not a system that can be cheated. God is not a fishing partner with whom we can exaggerate the size of our catch. Discipleship is an all or nothing proposition. Either we follow Christ, or we don't. And the way we communicate our discipleship to the world is by the fruits of our actions. If we are talking the talk, then we better be walking the walk. Because there are few things more damaging to Christ and his Kingdom than the hypocrisy of living a double standard.

Our relationship to God through the Lord Jesus Christ is eternal. What we see here is only the beginning of an eternity with God. If we want the fruits of eternal reward, then we need to take the responsibility of paying the price and taking responsibility in the here and now.

Obviously, this laser focused, no negotiating position on God's insistence for our devotion, is going to raise up a howl of objections. What Jesus is doing by following this section of "You cannot serve God and wealth" with his teaching, is placing it in the context of our physical needs, anxiety, faith, and trust. Do we trust in ourselves, our ingenuity, our cleverness, our McGiver-like attitude that we can overcome every obstacle with a little bit of chewing gum and a whole lot of duct-tape? Or do we trust in God?

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<sup>4</sup> Beaton, R., as found at:

[http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect\\_date=5/25/2008#](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=5/25/2008#)

<sup>5</sup> Psalm 90:4

All the money in the world doesn't solve death. Just ask Ted Kennedy. I suspect Joe Kennedy's legacy will simply be spread elsewhere after Ted has died and is buried in the ground.

Trust in God? Or trust in mammon?

Jesus' list is illustrative of very basic, but very real worries: what we eat, what we drink, and what we wear. If birds don't need to accumulate resources, why should we? They simply migrate on to new habitat, where God provides. God is the compassionate, good father-like figure who cares for his birds, feeding them whenever they have a need. In the same way, the life of a disciple is not lived in isolation but under the watchful care of a father who attends to our needs. In a harsh world that does not seem to care, this comes as good news.<sup>6</sup>

Most of us do have to worry about what we will wear. Our wardrobe, closets, and chest-of-drawers are crammed packed full. We are more concerned with color, design, matching fabric. But this isn't the case in most of the world, and it wasn't the case in the time of Jesus. His response is that the flowers of the field grow and bloom with ease and astonishing beauty. If this is true for mere flowers under the care of God, how much more will God take care of his people!

***We are called to wholehearted devotion to God.*** I do not believe that Jesus is expecting such devotion in exchange for God's gracious, compassionate, father-like care. God will love and care for us no matter what. The question remains, what are we going to do for God?

This probably isn't something we print on our evangelism brochures, or make new visitors take a solemn pledge. This is the perfection John Wesley writes about. This is the completion of a life of intentional faith development. When Jesus called Peter and Andrew, James and John, he didn't ask them to die for him. He simply invited them with, "Come!" Wholehearted devotion to God is only started with the call, but it grows into perfection by the time we are redeemed and saved.

As one grows into singular devotion to God, over the course of a lifetime of Christian development, one adopts the values, behaviors and priorities that God affirms. It doesn't mean that we don't accumulate possessions, wealth, food, or clothing. But it does mean that we live according to a different value system. We do not strive or worry about our needs. Rather, we look only, solely, and soul-fully to our compassionate heavenly father.

Our God will provide. He will protect. And one day, he will welcome us home. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Beaton, R.