

Series Sermon on the Mount

Scripture Matthew 6:19-34

In the passage we thought about last week, the teachings of Jesus centered on three important religious activities: charitable giving, prayer, and fasting. Jesus called these activities “acts of righteousness,” although He was being sarcastic when He described the behavior of religious hypocrites. We learned that God requires believers to have pure motives if giving, praying, and fasting are to be pleasing and acceptable to Him.

In Matthew chapter 6, beginning in verse 19, the emphasis shifts to the personal inner life and priorities that kingdom people must have. Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has emphasized that His followers must have an extraordinary kind of orientation to the world around them. Jesus wanted His listeners to shift the focus of their hearts and minds from the concerns of earth to the things of heaven. In our study today, we will think about the different kinds of ambitions and concerns that kingdom oriented people must have.

Read Matthew 6:19-24 Ambitions and Priorities

In the Jewish culture of Jesus’ time, material wealth was commonly believed to be a sign of God’s blessing and a reward for obedience. There was a small privileged group in Jewish society who were rather well off financially. The religious leaders were part of this group, and their wealth gave them the opportunity to brag about their closeness to God. They used their wealth to enhance their religious authority and prestige.

On the other hand, the typical citizens of Israel invested a lot of their energies on the accumulation of material possessions just to maintain their lives at a self-sustaining level. Both rich and poor were overwhelmingly concerned about things.

All worldly minded people can become ensnared by their desires for material possessions. Jesus understood the human desire to acquire possessions and strive for status and power and influence. He also understood that an abundance of material possessions and power would never satisfy human ambitions and greed but would, instead, increase human worries. In this portion of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus pointed out the foolishness of the wrong emphasis on life. From the passage we just read, we learn that kingdom people must not let any worldly concerns distract from their relationships with God.

According to Jesus, kingdom people are to work to “store up treasures in heaven,” not “treasures on earth.” “Earthly treasures” are not permanent nor are they incorruptible. “Moths and rust” represent destructive forces which reduce the value of “earthly treasures.” Furthermore, “earthly treasures” can be stolen and lost.

On the other hand, “heavenly treasures” have permanent, eternal value. “Heavenly treasures” are activities which are pleasing and acceptable to God. “Heavenly treasures” accumulate whenever people work to advance the purposes of God. That’s what kingdom people are expected to do — work for the goals and values of eternity while they are here on earth.

I’m sure you know several verses which explain the reason why God calls people to Himself. For example, the Apostle Paul wrote that God’s people “are created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for them to do” (*Ephesians 2:10*).

Jesus gave His listeners a lesson in physiology in verses 22-23. In the Jewish culture, the heart was considered to be the center of personality, and the source of personal ambitions and desires. The Jews would say that the values of a person are controlled by the attitudes of his/her heart. Jesus explained that there is a close relationship between what our eyes see and what our hearts desire. Our eyes determine the direction our bodies move, and the reverse is also true; what our hearts desire determines the kinds of things we look for.

This is why Jesus explained, in verses 22 and 23, the obvious truth that the “eye is the lamp of the body.” Eyes are necessary if we are to move around without running into objects. Eyes reveal things to the body, and therefore they can be conduits to the attitudes of the heart.

Jesus stated that there are two kinds of eyes. If a person has a desire for heavenly treasures, then that person will have “good eyes.” Both the eyes and the heart will be in sync, together concentrating on the things which are of eternal significance and, hence, will be pleasing to God. The New Testament writer, James, had a similar thought. He wrote, “The man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this ... will be blessed in what he does” (*James 1:25*). In other words, the focus of “good eyes” on the ways of God will lead to good deeds (the things a person does) which will lead to God’s blessings.

On the other hand, “evil eyes” are greedy and envious, causing the heart to covet what belongs to other people. Evil eyes give in to temptation easily. You will remember from Genesis 3 that Eve “saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye,” and this led to her disobedience. If the eyes of a person are fixed on earthly possessions, then the values, significance, and security of a person will be influenced by the world. Jesus said that the life of this kind of person was characterized by darkness because of the absence of spiritual interest.

In verses 19-23 Jesus explained that people must make choices between two kinds of treasure and two ways of seeing. The kind of treasure that people work for indicates their values, which are either earthly and materialistic or heavenly and eternal. The things people seek after indicates their priorities and desires, and again, this is either earthly and materialistic or heavenly and eternal.

In verse 24 Jesus summed up His teaching. People, He said, are under the authority of one of two “masters,” and their desires and choices determine which master. People either serve God or serve “Mammon.” (The word “Mammon” was a common Aramaic term for money or property.) According to Jesus, loyalties divided between God and the desire for earthly possessions are not possible. By their attitudes and lifestyles, people are aligned with one master or the other. People cannot orient their lives in both heavenly and earthly directions. People cannot lay up for themselves treasures of heaven and earthly treasures at the same time. The two desires are totally incompatible. There is a love/hate relationship between them.

Throughout His teaching, Jesus demanded unconditional commitment from kingdom people. He taught that His followers must reject everything that hindered their close attachment to God. Jesus contrasted time and again the incomparable value of the ways of heaven and the intrinsic worthlessness of earthly ways.

There are numerous verses in the New Testament that remind us of this same teaching. The Apostle John wrote: “Do not love the world, nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. And the world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God abides forever” (*1 John 2:15-17*).

The Apostle Paul wrote: “Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. If we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs” (*1 Timothy 6:6-12*).

A few verses after writing these words, Paul added, “Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them (those who are rich) to do good — to be rich in good deeds, to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasures for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life” (*1 Timothy 6:17-19*).

We can sum up the lesson in verses 19-24 with a simple statement: do not orient your lives around possessions. In the next passage Jesus exhorts us not to worry about the amount of our possessions and resources.

Read Matthew 6:25-34

There is an implied question behind these verses: If people choose God as Master and work to “store up treasures in heaven,” then how can their daily needs on earth be met? Many believers get hung up on this question, especially those who haven’t yet learned how to place their faith completely in God. I’m sure you noticed that the word “worry” appears several times in these verses, but did you also notice that, in each instance the word is used, Jesus made it clear that kingdom people are not to worry or be anxious about daily needs.

Verse 25 begins with the word “Therefore,” which means that verses 25-34 are linked to the previous verses. Jesus did not want His disciples to be confident about their heavenly status, yet worried about how they were going to survive on earth. This passage summarizes the previous question in this way: If God has brought people into His family, and given them eternal spiritual life, then He will provide for them the essential physical things they need in this life.

Jesus said that the provisions for birds of the air and the flowers of the field were examples of the concern and care of the heavenly Father. Because the Father provides food for the birds, kingdom people can have confidence that He will provide for them because people are “much more valuable” to Him than birds. And because the Father clothes the wildflowers of the field with such beauty, kingdom people can have confidence that He will “much more beautifully” clothe them.

The Apostle Paul made a series of similar statements in his letter to the believers in Rome. He wrote, “Since we have now been justified by his blood (referring to the crucifixion of Jesus), how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him. For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life” (*Romans 5:8-10*). There are several other statements in Scripture which explain the incredible concern that God has for His people.

Verse 32 explains that God knows all about our needs, so fretting over the necessities of life, food, clothes, and other daily needs, is simply evidence of our lack of faith and confidence in the promises of God and in the ability of God to take care of us. Worry is an indication that we do not adequately know Him, or that we do not trust Him, or have not yet yielded ourselves to Him as we should. Worry comes when we take our lives out of the Father’s hands and presume that we will be better off trying to control our own circumstances.

Instead of worry, we should acknowledge that our lives are in the hands of our heavenly Father. He is a loving Father who is responsible for the well-being of His children. He knows our needs. He knows all the circumstances of our lives — the end from the beginning. He has a plan for each of His children — a purpose He wants to fulfill in each one and He will provide all that is necessary to fulfill that purpose.

The Bible has much to say about the sovereign rule of God. All of the teaching of Sermon on the Mount is based on the fact that God rules this world, that His ways are perfect, and that His purposes will be brought to pass. It is God, our Father, who sets the boundaries of our lives, who has prepared the good works He wants us to accomplish (*see Ephesians 2:10*), and who promises that when we live according to His plan, we shall lack nothing. When we understand and accept these things, then we will experience the wisdom of trusting everything to Him and recognize the foolishness of anxiety.

Jesus said that pagans put a lot of energy and thought into how they take care of themselves — what they will eat and drink and wear (*verses 31-32*). They place no trust in God's fatherly care and have no fundamental goals beyond earthly materialism.

On the other hand, kingdom people must invest their interests and energies on matters that are of much greater importance than their earthly physical needs. Their highest priority is to actively seek God's kingdom and His righteousness. In verse 33 the word "seek" has the meaning of "endeavor to attain" or "make every effort to obtain." It is a reference to the use of physical energies. The followers of Jesus are to make the kingdom of God the center of attention in their lives, and the attainment of the righteousness of God their highest priority. If we do this, then we will receive the promise of verse 33. The necessities for life on earth will be provided by God.

The word “therefore” appears a second time in verse 34, which means that the statements which follow will be an application of the information in the preceding verses. Verse 34 indicates that we should live out our days one at a time. If we believe that God is in sovereign control, and that He has a deep commitment to our well being, then we can live day by day without undue concern about the future. We can expect that each day will bring new challenges to our faith, and, hence, new potential reasons to worry, but we need to remember that with each new challenge, there will be a fresh outpouring of God’s grace and provision. New challenges are simply new opportunities to trust Him and to grow in faith.

The kingdom person clings to the values and perspectives of the kingdom, and, in broad terms, this requires us to remain unswervingly loyal to the values and ways of God, and this means we must maintain an undiminished trust and confidence in God.

There is a description of earthly minded people in Psalm 49, and I want to conclude this message by reading several verses. Verse 16 has instructions for the kingdom person: “Do not be overawed when a man grows rich, when the splendor of his house increases.” Then the reason is given: “For he (the rich man) will take nothing with him when he dies, his splendor will not descend with him. Though while he lived he counted himself blessed —and men praise you when you prosper — he will join the generations of his fathers, who will never again see the light of life.”

Other verses in the Psalm also apply to the subject of heart attitude. For example, earthly-minded people are described this way in verses 11 – 14: “In their thoughts their houses will remain forever, their dwellings for endless generations, for they have named lands after themselves. But man, despite his riches, does not endure; he is like the beasts that perish.” In contrast, the kingdom person knows what will happen when he “seeks the kingdom of God and his righteousness.” Verse 15 of the Psalm gives assurance that “God will redeem my soul from the grave; he will surely take me to himself.”

Jesus did not want His followers to worry, and we won’t have to if we obey His teaching and live according to the ways of the kingdom of God