BUT SEEK FIRST HIS KINGDOM

Matthew 6:19–34

Key Verse: 6:33

“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

We might assume that those who wrote the Bible were really holy and righteous people. But Matthew shatters that assumption. He used to be a tax collector. It means he used to live for making money. Among his fellow Jews it was a disgraceful occupation. Squeezing money out of people made him cruel, selfish, and, an extremely lonely man. But after experiencing the grace of Jesus, Matthew changed dramatically. He left his former occupation and accepted Jesus’ message of the hope of the kingdom of God. Based on this hope, Jesus taught him a totally different value system.

Today’s passage is just one section of the famous Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus gives some radical teachings on how he wants us to live. In this sermon Jesus teaches on difficult subjects like relationships and religion. He takes the old understandings about these things to a whole new level. In today’s passage Jesus tackles head on the subject of money. But the passage isn’t just about money; it’s about what we *seek*. What do we really want out of life? What’s our goal? Often, we don’t even really know. We’re just struggling to get through life day by day. We don’t take the time to reflect on what we’re really after. Many people pursue blindly what ends up being a huge disappointment. Let’s spend a little time listening carefully to what Jesus is saying, try to understand what he means and what choices and decisions we may need to make in light of it. May God speak to each of us through his word today.

Let’s read verses 19–20. Here Jesus repeats the word “treasures.” And he contrasts treasures on earth with treasures in heaven. The earthly kind get eaten by moths and vermin, or they get stolen by thieves. But heavenly treasures are indestructible and more secure than all the gold at Fort Knox. Earthly treasures can be possessions like a house, clothing, a car, or all kinds of cool stuff. Whatever they are, they all have one thing in common—they all don’t last. They gradually deteriorate, or they can even get stolen. So it’s kind of foolish to make our lives all about grabbing such things. But what are heavenly treasures? Jesus has been talking about a reward God gives. He repeatedly says that God sees what's done in secret, and if we do good things not to impress people, but only for God to see, God will reward us. As we keep doing good things for God to see, we’re storing up treasures in heaven. We may not even remember what we did, but God will. But this direction, storing up treasures in heaven, often means sacrificing treasures on earth. We don’t just throw them away; whatever treasures we may have on earth we use to share generously with others. We do this not to earn our way into heaven by our good works, but in response to God’s grace. God pours out his grace to us in Jesus. He forgives all our sins. It’s more amazing than we can ever know. We’re so thankful for this amazing grace that we really want to share our treasures with others. And when we do, God prepares treasures for us in heaven. To some people, sharing our earthly treasures may look foolish. But in light of eternity it’s truly a wise way of living.

Then Jesus gives a punch line. Read verse 21. If our treasures are on earth, our hearts will be occupied by the things of the world. If our treasures are in heaven, our hearts will be there. “Where’s your *heart*?” It’s a very real question. Our professors want our hearts. Our coaches or our bosses at work want our hearts. A significant other wants our heart. Heaven can sound like such an abstract, far away thing. In the midst of all these demands on us, what does it mean to have our hearts in heaven? And why should we? Jesus has just said if our treasures are on earth, they’ll not last, which leads to great disappointment. But if our treasures are in heaven, they last forever, which leads to great confidence, security and joy. And if we act all religious while our hearts are in the world, we’re hypocrites. So how can we get our hearts into heavenly treasure? Jesus said we have to start storing our treasures there. It’s an act of faith, and, a process. As we start doing good things only for God to see, we start storing up treasures in heaven, and the hope of heaven becomes more and more real to us.

To help us, Jesus moves from the heart to the eyes. Read verses 22,23. Here he contrasts healthy eyes and unhealthy eyes, and light and darkness. At first it’s hard to see how it’s connected to what he’s been saying. But if we look at the footnotes, “healthy eyes” means “generous eyes,” and “unhealthy eyes” means “stingy eyes.” So unhealthy eyes are eyes that are obsessed with material things. The more we look at material things, the more our hearts can be captured by them, and then, the stingier we become. We need to turn the eyes of our hearts by faith to Jesus and to God’s kingdom. Ephesians 1:18 says, “I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people…” As the hope of heaven becomes more real to us, our hearts are enlightened; our “whole body is full of light.” We can see the world from God’s point of view. We’re free of fear, which makes us dark, and can have the courage to live generously with everybody. In contrast Jesus says, “If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!” (23b) He’s warning us not to let greed capture our hearts and plunge us into such a spiritual darkness that we start making really foolish choices.

Then Jesus draws a conclusion. Read verse 24. Here he’s describing not just a dramatic choice at the beginning of Christian life, where we might sell all our possessions and give to the poor, but an ongoing relationship. He says we can’t serve two masters. Once we get engrossed in serving one, we start hating and despising the other. If we start serving Money as our master, we start hating and despising God. If we start serving God as our Master, we start hating and despising money—maybe not literally, but we hate and despise its potential control over our hearts. Jesus is basically saying we all need to make a choice: who’s going to be our Master? God or Money? Notice the word money is capitalized here. It means if God is going to be our true master and we’re really going to serve him, we’ve got to smash the idol of Money in our hearts. Again, it takes real faith to do that, faith to start depending on God.

In this sermon Jesus has been speaking to his disciples (5:1,2). They’ve already left everything to follow him (4:18–22), their jobs and any financial security they had. Without jobs they have very little possessions anymore. Their bank accounts are emptied out. Jesus knows how financially insecure they feel, so he speaks to it. He’s speaking to some really poor men, poor by choice. Read verse 25. In this verse Jesus starts speaking about worries. In verses 25–34 he continues to mention worry, six times. So often, the pursuit of money starts with worries. Jesus says worrying about food and clothing is superficial, because life and the body are more important, right? We may not be so poor that we're anxious about sheer survival. But we all have things we’re worrying about. Some worry about their major or their grades. Some worry about how to pay for college. Some worry about what others think of them, what they look like, or how to impress. Some worry about finding a great life partner. Some worry about losing the partner they already have. Some worry about their parents. And some parents worry about their children. When we worry, we can’t sleep well, and we age prematurely. Worries give us ulcers. Worries are unhealthy.

To cure us of our worries, Jesus starts teaching us some things about God. Read verse 26. Jesus teaches from nature a beautiful truth: God is our heavenly Father, and he cares for all his creatures. It’s evident in nature, for all to see: he cares for the birds. He cares much more for human beings. He’s the one who’s really provides for all his creatures, including us. This basic truth, that God will provide for our needs, heals our worries. Read verse 27. Jesus rebukes the folly of worrying, because it’s so unproductive; ultimately, worrying can’t add even a single hour to our lives. We tend to worry about things we don’t have any control over and aren’t even sure will happen. Worries cripple us from doing the good things we could be doing with our lives.

Sensing that they’re still not convinced, Jesus gives another illustration from nature. Read verses 28–30. God clothes the flowers and grass of the fields with such splendorous beauty, without them even trying! Jesus is saying that since we belong to God, if we rely on him and give our best to serve him, God will surely clothe us, since God considers us much more valuable than perishable plants. Jesus also puts his finger on the root cause of worrying: “you of little faith.” When our faith is too small, we worry. Jesus wants our faith to grow until it becomes real faith in God our Father, who’s living, who provides and cares for his children who trust in him.

Read verses 31–33. Jesus wants us to live differently than people who don’t believe in God. What’s the difference? Instead of running after what to eat, drink or wear like everybody else, he wants us to seek first God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness. It means to turn our hearts to a different direction.

But what does it really mean to “seek first his kingdom and his righteousness”? First of all, it means to take it seriously, to really put our hope in it, to really believe it. Only if we believe it’s real will we seek it. How can we believe it when we don’t see it? It’s a call to live by faith, to believe this kingdom as God’s promise. Jesus said, “Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom” (Lk12:32).

It’s also about more than our own personal salvation. To seek first his kingdom is to seek to see his kingdom grow in this world. Jesus taught that God’s kingdom is growing like a growing seed, without any human help (Mk4:26ff.). But he also taught us to pray here, earlier in this chapter: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come…” (Mt6:9,10a). It should be at the top of our prayer requests. Simply, it means to pray that more and more people would come to believe in Jesus and become members of God’s kingdom.

Jesus also said earlier in this Sermon on the Mount, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (Mt5:6). To seek first his righteousness is also a personal pursuit: to hunger and thirst for a personal relationship with God. Psalm 42:1 says, “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God.” Jesus’ words, “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness” are a direct challenge to our spiritual apathy. We need to personally invest in getting to know God deeper, spending real time in personal prayer and Scripture study.

Verse 33 says, “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness.” The word “first” here is key. It means priority. It’s a challenge to live by. Jesus wants us to make seeking a personal relationship with God, and serving and growing his kingdom, our first priority. But how do we really do that? We all have priorities we set daily: eat, clean up, do what I need to do, have fun. Without priorities we feel like we wasted our time. The beginning of a school year is a great time to set priorities. But what are good priorities? For students, study has to be a priority. But even in the midst of studies students can “seek first his kingdom and his righteousness.” How? It can start with something really basic like making a decision to come to church every Sunday, and making time for Bible study during the week. If it’s our priority, we can do it, no matter how busy we are. For young families, it can mean serving ministry as a priority.

Jesus makes a promise to those who live by this spiritual priority: “…and all these things will be given to you as well.” When we put our hearts into seeking first God’s kingdom and his righteousness, God blesses us with all that we need, financially, emotionally and spiritually. It’s not a theory; it’s a promise of God that we need to hold onto and put into practice in our daily lives. When I was young and in college, I accepted this challenge to seek first his kingdom. I gave my heart to studying the Bible and serving the ministry. I wasn’t seeking a girlfriend or a life partner. But when I sought first his kingdom and his righteousness, God provided me with the most amazing life partner, Kathy, whom I could never have found on my own. All of us need to experience personally the truth of Matthew 6:33 all throughout our journey of life.

Let’s read verse 34. Jesus is saying to live day by day depending on God. What a peaceful, beautiful life it is!

Today Jesus is asking us to think about what we’re really seeking. We may not be actively seeking money. But what are we seeking? Is it to be perceived as “cool”? Is it respect, or love, or stability? Some people know exactly what they want and are pursuing it full throttle; they don’t have time for anything or anyone other than what they’re after. May God help us to accept Jesus’ words and experience God’s living presence, his greatest blessings and his greatest rewards.