

Getting Priorities Right

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[0 : 00] Well, let me welcome everyone to this lunchtime Bible talk. We are taking up again the Sermon on the Mount. I was away last week, so I wasn't able to be here. I'm very grateful to Josh for standing in.

So, we're returning to Matthew chapter 6. This is about Christ's radical kingdom, this whole sermon, and today we are going to read on page 811 and read verses 19 to 34.

So, let's read the passage, first of all.

Your whole body will be full of light, but if your eyes bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is that darkness?

No one can serve two masters, but 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. Therefore, I tell you, do not be anxious about your life.

[1 : 29] 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? 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 which of you, by being anxious, can add a single hour to the span of life?

Why are you anxious 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 arrayed like one of these.

But 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?

Therefore, do not be anxious, saying, What shall we eat or what shall we drink? Or what shall we wear? For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.

[2 : 36] But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Therefore, do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself.

Sufficient for the day is its own trouble. Amen. This is the word of the Lord. Now let's have a moment or two of prayer. Lord God, we thank you for this opportunity to draw aside, and from the other voices that we hear, some of them outside of us, some of them in our own hearts, and listen to your voice and the things you have to say to us.

As we read about your kingdom, and as we contemplate the dreadful events in Paris a few days ago, we realize, Lord, how far this earth is from your kingdom coming in its fullness.

And so we pray, Lord, the prayer that you taught us. We pray that your kingdom will indeed come on earth as it is in heaven. And we pray, Lord, that as we look at your kingdom together and listen to your voice to us, that we may indeed hear what you have to say to each one of us.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. A Christian girl who was in her final years in school was having a conversation with her minister, and he was very interested in what she was going to do with her life.

[4 : 12] Her grades were rather good, and he asked what she was going to do when she left school, and she said, well, I'm going to go to university and study law. And after that, he said, well, she said, I'm en route.

I hope to meet someone and marry and have children. And after that, he said, well, I said, I want to practice law, and with no barriers for women in the professions now, I may even become a judge. And after that, he said, and after that, he said, and after that. And he replied, why set your ambitions so low?

Why not consider eternity? Why set your ambitions so low? Why not consider eternity? Now, looking around this room, I think it's pretty fair to say that there is nobody in their final year at school.

Even the youngest of us, our school days are behind us. And you may therefore wonder why I've used that as an illustration. Well, the reason is that all our lives, however old we become, whether we're middle-aged, old, or young, the problem of laying up treasure in this world, of becoming obsessed with the present world, remains with us.

[5 : 31] Oh, you may start desiring different things as you get older, but there is no doubt that the lure of the world, what John in his letter calls loving the world, remains with us and remains part of us.

And we get so easily absorbed in a materialist culture. Of course, today, particularly, a world of instant gratification, we expect everything by pressing a button nowadays.

We want everything yesterday. So, once again, Jesus' radical message is saying, set your heart, lay up for yourselves treasures on earth.

Do not lay up for yourselves treasure on earth. And then verse 21, where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Now, the heart in the Bible is a bigger thing than in English.

It means not just the feelings and emotions. It means the whole personality, the thought life, everything that makes us what we are.

[6 : 33] And Jesus says, where your treasure is, where the thing you most value is, there your heart will be also. That was what...

And so often doesn't this surface in our conversation. You don't have to be talking to anyone for very long before you discover what they're really interested in. And so often it's possession, so often it's materialism.

Now, the link here between the previous passage is the... Jesus has talked about the hypocrisy of false piety in verses 1 to 18 that we looked at a couple of weeks ago.

Now he's talking about the obsession with materialism, which also sets the false and the true in contrast. Praying, giving, fasting, there's a right way and a wrong way.

Now, as far as possessions are concerned, as far as material goods are concerned, there's also a right way and a wrong way. So let's ask two questions. Verses 19 to 24.

[7 : 37] What are we to do about possessions? Now, Jesus is concerned here, as he was in the Beatitudes, with basic attitudes.

And first of all, there is a negative, something to avoid. Do not lay up for yourselves or, more exactly, stop storing it up.

In other words, this is a thing we naturally do. If we are left to our own devices, this is what we naturally do, isn't it? Lay up treasure on earth. And we need to do something about it because it casts its spell over us.

Now, of course, Jesus is not saying don't invest wisely. He is not saying don't plan for the future. He is not saying be irresponsible, neglect your family and other responsibilities you may have.

Indeed, it would be irresponsible to do that. Nor is he saying don't enjoy God's good gifts because that's not what the passage is about.

[8 : 38] Rather, don't trust in them. Don't become obsessed with them. Because no possession will last forever.

And even a possession that lasts for our whole life, we can't take it with us. So, Jesus is saying don't place all your eggs in the basket of this world to recycle a cliché, I suppose.

He's saying why not consider eternity? That's what he's saying to us. There are good things in the world. There are right things in the world.

There's a right kind of responsibility. But don't become obsessed with it. So, positive then. Lay up, he says, treasures in heaven. Verse 20. Now, that's not like the idea developed in the church in the Middle Ages.

That by doing good deeds, you build up a credit account of good works in heaven. The so-called treasury of merit. What he's talking about, though, is good things about character.

[9 : 42] About what we are and what we do. Which will last into eternity. That's what he's saying. Now, many of the things we do will not last into eternity.

And I'm not just talking about bad things. I'm talking about ordinary things as well. Well, but using this earthly life for the Lord and for his people will last into eternity.

Caring for the poor and disadvantaged and so on. That will last into eternity. And remember, he's already said, do these things, but don't trumpet them. And he's saying this may be costly and painful in this life, but will blossom in the world to come.

A wrong way to look at material possessions. Not just material possessions. The whole fabric of our lives. Our relationships. The work we do. Our leisure activities.

All these kind of things are involved. And what's the motivation for this in verses 22 to 24? Laying up treasure on earth is compared to being blind.

[10:49] What he says is, if you lay up treasure on earth, you're blind, or at least you're near-sighted. You can't see very far. Whereas laying up treasure in heaven is being able to see the whole picture to consider eternity.

And the eye and the heart are often compared in the Bible. In Psalm 119, the Psalm reflecting on God's word, the Psalmist talks about, With my whole heart, I obey your commandments, and I affix my eye on your commandments.

Same kind of idea. And Jesus is talking about the question of double vision here. If we have double vision, if we try to make secondary things first things, then we are not seeing properly.

That's the point he's making. Laying up treasure in heaven, you see, is very practical. It's not just about rewards in eternity. It's about the way we live now. I mean, you've heard the silly phrase, So-and-so is too heavenly-minded to be of any earthly use.

I ask you, have you ever met anyone like that? I most certainly haven't. It's certainly not my problem. My problem is being so earthly-minded and so often caught up in laying up treasure on earth that I easily forget about laying up treasure in heaven.

[12:14] So, it's about living now, about seeing things clearly. And behind all this is the more basic question of verse 24, who are we doing this for?

Indeed, why are we Christian at all? And Jesus says, you cannot serve two masters. Once again, don't carry that to extremes. At various points in my life, I've served two masters.

Recently, I served both Cornhill and the Tron. When I was in Durham, I served both the college I worked in and the church I was minister of. It's not many of you in your life will probably have done more than one job.

And indeed, nowadays, it's becoming more common than it was at one time. What Jesus is saying is that you cannot serve God if you are actually serving anyone else.

Because to serve anyone else is ultimately idolatry. It doesn't mean, as I say, we don't love other things. It doesn't mean we don't enjoy his good gifts.

[13:15] What it does mean is we don't worship them. We don't make them idols. And we do make things into idols. Make an idol of our job, for example.

Make an idol of our brains. Some people who are blessed that way can make an idol of their looks, their hobbies, their, you know, all the kind of things which are good in themselves.

But once they take over, they become idols. And they must always be secondary. So what about, what's the attitude then to possessions?

The attitude, possessions are good and right, forgiven by God, and accepted thankfully from God. But if they're made into idols, then they will destroy us.

They'll make us blind. And the second part of the passage, verses 25 to 34, what about ambitions? It was ambition that we began talking about at the beginning.

[14:15] Verse 25. Notice the therefore. This is summing up the previous teaching. Think clearly, he says, about the alternatives.

He's not just gadding about from one subject to another. It would have to be said, some speakers do. And as if they were in a labyrinth. We've got to think clearly about the alternatives.

Treasure on earth or treasure in heaven. And that, of course, is linked to the earlier part of the sermon. If God is truly our Father in heaven, who gives us our daily bread, then we can trust him.

So it's easy to connect. We are often afraid. If we don't become obsessed with material possessions and so on, if we don't become obsessed with our job and our relationships, that things will go badly wrong.

And Jesus is saying here, look, your Father knows. That must be both one of the most terrifying and the most comforting expressions we can ever hear.

[15:23] Your Father knows. If I'm going in real deep, dark trouble, remember this. Your Father knows. It's also quite terrifying when we're doing something that rather our Father didn't know.

So, Jesus is saying, if treasure in heaven is more durable, then this is how it's to behave. And first of all, the true priority is the kingdom of God.

That's verse 33, an often quoted verse. Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

In other words, make the glory of God your true motivation. Consider eternity, if you like. And just as he said about giving, praying, and fasting, do it for him.

Don't do it for glory from others. Of course we love the praise of others, don't we? And we're quite hurt if we don't get it.

[16:23] I'm just looking around to see if anyone's agreeing with me. Or maybe you're also committed to treasure in heaven that such unworthy thoughts never pass through your minds.

No, we... And of course, we... That doesn't mean that it's not right to praise people for what they do. And we mustn't... You mustn't take this to extreme and basically say, Oh, so-and-so did a marvelous piece of work.

I'm not going to tell her in case she gets conceited. You know, we mustn't behave that way. What he is saying is, there is only ultimately one well done that matters.

When we stand before the Lord, it will be... I mean, our provisional assessments will probably be laid aside.

Because the Lord sees not only what we're doing, but the motivation. So, the true priority, the kingdom of God. The second thing is, Jesus cares for our material needs. And that's the point of verses 25 to 32 about the birds of the air, the lilies of the field.

[17:29] It's really a development of give us today our daily bread. Bread not simply meaning bread literally, but bread is so often used in the Bible. The necessities of living, the things that we can't live without.

Don't become engrossed with these. Don't become anxious. Now, I seem to be saying, I seem to be giving every phrase the death of a thousand qualifications here.

Jesus is not saying go through life with a laid-back attitude, caring about nobody and nothing. In a world where thousands of refugees are homeless.

In a world, in our own country, the gulf between wealth and poverty. All these kind of things. Rather, we're not to spend our time in frantic worry.

How much money do we need? Well, the answer is usually a little bit more than we have. And I think this is something that most people find, whether they're very wealthy or just making ends meet.

[18:38] Jesus says, your father knows that you need them. And we must never, ever give in to the so-called prosperity gospel. The gospel, the idea that began across the Atlantic, but like everything else that begins across the Atlantic, has crossed that sea and come here.

The idea that if you're truly pleasing God, your bank balance, or balance is more likely, will be filled. You'll have beautiful children who are a credit to you.

You'll have probably two cars in the drive. Oh, Lord, please give me a Mercedes-Benz. That sort of thing. And the idea that, and this, of course, is a total misapplication of some verses in Proverbs, which talk about God giving us material prosperity.

You need to become Job, if you think that is a simple idea. No, it means we're not to spend our time in frantic worry. And, of course, there are Christian people, as others, who don't have what they need.

And then, of course, other aspects of the gospel come in here as well, don't they? We need to, in what some people, this will be their main ministry.

[19:53] For others, they will do what they can, both by giving and prayer. So, Jesus says, don't become obsessed with material needs. Now, of course, we live in a world where advertising encourages us to do just that, don't we?

Particularly at Christmas. It's the television commercials, which make people buy things they can't afford and don't need. And we're all affected by that.

And finally, Jesus says, don't be over-anxious about the future. Verse 34. Do not be anxious about tomorrow. For tomorrow, be anxious for itself.

This is a reminder that we can in no way control the future. And that excessive worry about the future will not make the future any different.

Now, once again, that doesn't mean we... I grew up among delightful, good Christian people who took everything in the Bible with a pedantic literalism.

[20 : 59] And they took this verse to mean you shouldn't take out an insurance policy or things like that. Now, that is quite wrong. They said the Lord will provide. But if there are insurance policies and social services, that is the Lord providing.

The Lord normally provides through these kind of means. He normally... After all, if you live next door to a baker's shop and you can afford to buy, you don't expect manna from heaven.

And so on. So, the point Jesus is saying is don't be obsessed with the future. You can't control it. It will happen. But your Father is in control of the future.

And the present is the only time, remember, in which we can receive any blessing. The blessing... We're thankful for the blessings of the past, of course. And we trust in the blessings of the future. But the present moment is the only time when we can ever receive any blessing or any gift from God. And also, this must be seen, like everything else in the Gospel, in the light of the cross.

[22 : 13] But... Sufficient for the day is its own trouble. Jesus is saying trouble will come. He's not saying, if you believe in me, there will be no trouble.

He is saying trouble will come. And I see, like everything else in the Gospel, it's moving towards the cross. Where God seemed to forsake his only son.

Where trouble, in a way that you could never have imagined, came upon the one who totally did the will of God. So, in this world, we need to trust.

There will be a time when we will see, but in this world, we need to trust. And Jesus says, trust in the right God. Trust, stand firm upon the true rock.

And don't become obsessed with possessions and material things which will perish. Amen. Let's pray. Lord God, we confess that we so often do not lay up treasure in heaven.

[23 : 23] We become totally absorbed with the things of earth. And we become totally over-anxious as to whether you can provide.

Give to us faith. Give to us courage. And help us to build on the true rock, the rock Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen. Amen.

I want to support you. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.