

Seek Ye First
(Matthew 6:24-34)
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Note: The text below was prepared for oral delivery rather than for publication in print. As such, be aware that sentence fragments are intentionally used and that this document has not been edited to correct the errors in grammar, sentence structure, etc.

I. Introduction

This morning we will continue our study of the Sermon on the Mount by looking at Matthew 6, verses 24-34. As you turn there, let me set the stage by briefly reminding you of the context for today's passage. As you know, the theme of the Sermon on the Mount is the Gospel of the kingdom ó speaking of a dominion, a rule or reign ó a reign of grace ó grace reigning through righteousness as Romans 5:21, sets forth: ***“That as sin hath reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord.”*** This reign is the kingdom spoken of by Christ.

Now here in chapter 6, we've already seen how Christ engaged his audience with a discussion concerning various religious duties and activities ó specifically alms giving, prayer and fasting. We saw how these 3 duties might be considered as typical of all our religious endeavors. Christ had set forth how we might evaluate whether or not our religious efforts are acceptable before God by directing our attention to the heart of the matter, to the motive behind doing that which we do. In penetrating to the motive, Christ exposes the sinfulness inherent in the performance of religious activities and duties by all of us prior to God-given spiritual life. And this should stir us to examine our own religious motives to see whether our participation springs from the motive of grace, characteristic of His kingdom, or whether we are prompted to act because we believe our actions merit or earn some favor before God ó the religion of works.

And then in verses 19-23, Christ summarized what He had been teaching up to that point when He said “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth. . . But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” And in today's text, down in verse 33 we will see just how we are to lay up for ourselves incorruptible, eternal treasures in heaven, when Christ commands, ***“But seek ye first the kingdom***

of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.”

And it's from this verse I've chosen the title for today's message, "Seek Ye First." So let's begin by reading this passage, beginning in Matthew 6, verse 24 where Christ says:

“No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon. ²⁵Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment? ²⁶Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they? ²⁷Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature? ²⁸And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: ²⁹And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. ³⁰Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to day is, and to morrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith? ³¹Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? ³²(For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. ³³But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. ³⁴Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.”

As we consider this passage recognize that it is really about trust and dependence on God for all things, temporal and eternal. As I studied over the passage, it occurred to me that there are 2 aspects to our natural rebellion before God that stands in opposition to complete trust and total dependence upon God for all things. Now I say "natural" rebellion to emphasize again that we all come into this world as rebels, as the scriptures assert, dead in our trespasses and sins, none righteous, by nature just as the children of wrath. And this natural rebellion is manifested in these 2 ways:

- 1) In our false religion ó how we all initially approach God in our desire to go to heaven.

Christ has already addressed this subject by pointing us to examine the motive behind our religious duties to see that trusting in anything other than His righteousness, finding any merit anywhere else (even in our religion) is contrary to the rule of His kingdom, His reign of grace. And as we saw back in chapter 5 vs. 20, except our righteousness would exceed the best of the best (the Scribes and the Pharisees put together), He says we shall not enter into His kingdom. We need a perfect righteousness beyond that which we can produce. It is none other than that which the Lord of glory came to provide and did provide in His life and death in full and perfect satisfaction to the law and justice of God.

2) But as we will see in today's text, there is a 2nd manifestation of our rebellion before God that is evidenced by our indifference or neglect. And in today's text we will observe how this indifference or neglect of the things of God, of the things pertaining to His kingdom, springs from 2 sources:

- (a) First, there is a natural rebellion evidenced by our preoccupation with the other things of this life ó things that divert us away from seeking His kingdom and His righteousness first and foremost.
- (b) Secondly, our tendency to be indifferent or neglectful may also spring from inordinate worry and anxiousness, reflecting our sinful lack of trust and faith in God ó the God we claim to trust our eternal destiny upon.

So with this in mind, let's go back and consider these verses in more detail, beginning back in verse 24 where we read: ***“No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.”***

Now remember that Christ had just pointed them to examine their hearts by assessing what they treasured, prompting all of us to consider just what motivates our religious efforts. Where do we find our reward? And then here in vs. 24, He declares that you can't have it both ways. If you're all about serving your self, or finding some merit within, laying up treasures here on earth, then you're not laying up treasures in heaven. Our thoughts are generally preoccupied with that which we value or treasure, reflecting our heart's desires. Here Christ points out the impossibility of someone serving two masters.

Now based upon what has been said up until now, we can see that laying up treasures on earth, at least in part, refers to those who believe that their efforts at religion here on earth merit something before God, yet Christ has repeatedly said, "they have their reward" — that is, those rewards derived from the esteem received from this religious world — that is, from the religion of works.

But as we examine the verses that follow, I think we will see a dual perspective regarding what is being taught. That is, in addition to addressing the folly of natural, false religion, Christ is also addressing the danger of allowing the interests, cares and concerns of this world to divert us — to cause us to neglect seeking Him first. And as we will see, that is no less telling on where our hearts are than the false doctrine of this world's religion. God must preserve us or we would all go the way of the thorny ground hearer depicted in the Parable of the Seed and the Sower. You recall the plant sprung up among thorns — it initially appeared to have life, having received the true Gospel of grace, (the seed that was sown), but after a while, the thorns, (the cares and the deceitfulness of the riches of this world), took it away, choked it out, exposing that it was not destined to live. Now it is clear in God's word that who don't believe His Gospel are lost — lacking spiritual life. But for those of us who do profess belief in His Gospel, this issue of neglect and indifference toward the Gospel and the things of God is not to be taken lightly for when it persists, it too is an evidence of the absence of spiritual life.

Now when Christ says no man can serve two masters, it is understood that this speaks of two masters whose orders are contrary to one another. In the days when I was more active with my business, I had a partner who owned an equal share of the company, and, consequently, there were a few key managers in our company who reported directly to both of us. Now this worked fine as long as we were in total agreement. However, practically speaking, these leaders could not effectively report to us both simultaneously concerning every area of responsibility because inevitably, one of us would contradict the instructions of the other. So, while officially they may have reported to both of us, over the years, we divided up areas of oversight in recognition of the impossible position this would place folks in. As Christ suggests here, when orders are contradictory, choices must be made. They will love the one (be in subjection to them) and hate the other (that is, not be in subjection to them) or vice-versa.

And He describes these 2 competing masters as God and mammon. Now that word ðmammonö is commonly used to refer to wealth and riches, or material gain. The only other place this word is found is over in Luke 16 and there in verse 9 it speaks of the ðmammon of unrighteousness.ö In my study, I discovered that some think that this refers not only to gain or riches, but to whatever is in opposition to the Lord ó a competing master so to speak.

It could be interpreted, in light of Luke's usage (the ðmammon of unrighteousnessö), as anything which is hostile to a state of grace. And I believe this broader interpretation fits here as well since Christ is addressing in this chapter both (a) false religion and (b) neglect due to the concerns and diversions of this world. Certainly, whenever wealth and riches, material gain, or other competing interests become the priority of a person's life, he or she is in essence serving themselves and cannot serve God. No man can serve 2 masters. Likewise, when one presumes to find within himself spiritual riches contrary to the Gospel of grace, as in possessing some merit before God that he or she presumes to be able to produce, then this too would be in opposition to this rule of His kingdom ó the kingdom of grace which reigns through the one perfect righteousness of God produced by Christ and Him alone.

In Colossians 3:5, Paul speaks of covetousness being idolatry and I think conceptually this is what he was referring to. Any interest or pursuit that takes precedence over seeking and serving the Lord is the product of our own self-love and selfishness. So in verse 25, Christ says, ðTherefore,ö in light of this reality ó and He begins an explanation that gets summarized down in verse 33 ó in light of this reality that you cannot serve God and that which competes with or is hostile to God (the mammon of unrighteousness), then consciously make this choice ó ***“Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness...”***

Now I'll continue to make some comments on these verses as I read through them; but, as you can see they need little explanation and know that I (nor anyone else) can really add to the beauty of these illustrations given by Christ. So with that in mind, look with me as He continues in verse 25 where it reads: ð***Therefore I say unto you,*** (since you cannot serve 2 masters, go this way) ***Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment?”***

Now we know in light of other scriptures that Christ is not promoting or condoning laziness, or suggesting we shouldn't plan at all for the future and the things of this life. He is not promoting a welfare state either. Paul told the believers in 2 Thess. 3:10 that *“if any would not work, neither should he eat.”* And I also don't think he is forbidding the pursuit of riches and enjoyment of the things of this life under all circumstances. But the clear message is that He is forbidding a situation in which we allow these things to occupy our thoughts to the point that they take precedence over thinking on things above. He is forbidding the undue, anxious cares or misplaced priorities that would cause us to neglect the greater, more important and valuable eternal matters of the Gospel and the kingdom of heaven. When He says *“...Take no thought...”* He again is directing us to consider what dominates our minds, our interests. Are you (am I) consumed primarily with those things that sustain this fleeting, corruptible life? ó a life on earth described back in verse 19 as one where *“...where moth and rust doth corrupt...”*

He continues in verse 26 saying : *“Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?”* Notice He directs us to consider the *“...fowls of the air...”* Not pen raised birds for whom someone is assigned to feed and care for, not the poultry raised in chicken houses for whom food and shelter are regularly provided, but the *“...fowls of the air...”* ó wild birds who don't have any shelter or provision other than that provided by God.

And then in verse 27: *“Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature?”* Now a cubit was believed to be the distance between the elbow and the tip of the finger, and later was considered a measure equivalent to about 18 inches. While a child will grow several cubits before reaching adulthood, you and I are totally unable to affect our ultimate height simply by our thoughts and wishes. And we accept that fact.

But He continues in verse 28 saying: *“And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field,...”* (Again ó *“...of the field,...”* ó not the flowers in your flower pots and in your garden beds that are tended to and watered, but the lilies of the field who are exposed to all the elements, to being stomped over by animals. He says consider the lilies of the field and *“... how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin:”* (They don't have to work to produce their beautiful clothing, to spin their harvest into

cloth) ²⁹ *And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.* ³⁰ *Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to day is, and to morrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith?"*

Shall God not take care of all our needs according to His riches in glory? I am speaking of the redeemed that have been purchased by His blood and made one with Christ before the eyes of the Father. If you are among that number, can He forget you, overlook you? No ó He could no more overlook those for whom Christ lived and died than He could overlook the precious blood of Christ that bought their salvation. As I Peter 5:7 suggests, *Cast ó... all your care upon him; for he careth for you.*" As Paul recorded in Romans 8: *"What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us? ³²He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?"*

And who among us can read this and not concur with Christ's assessment in verse 30, *ó O ye of little faith?ö* If God has granted you the gift of faith, then you have, by the regenerating, miraculous power of the Holy Spirit been stopped dead in your tracks as you traveled down the broad road that leads to destruction and instead turned completely around so as to repent from trusting in yourself (your faith, your decision, whatever) to trusting in Him for all of your salvation ó to see the necessity of a righteousness outside of yourself, and with that to also see the certainty that the one perfect righteousness established by Christ shall completely justify you, save you to the uttermost. Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God who justified and Christ who died, yea who is risen (Romans 8). If your hope, your faith, is in Christ and the righteousness He alone established in His obedience unto death, then that faith dares not to look at itself as contributing one iota to one's redemption, justification or the procurement thereof. So why not trust God in all things?

And as that faith grows, it only grows in appreciation for how irrelevant our *ólittle faithö* actually is in sharp contrast to that which alone attains and maintains our salvation ó the blood and righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ. You've all heard the adage, *óthe more you know, the more you know you don't know.ö* I believe we can apply that same principle to faith.

The more we grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, the less confidence we have in ourselves and the more we realize and appreciate the absolute insufficiency of our own faith (or anything else produced by us, or in us, or through us) to merit or procure any blessing from our holy God. As we grow, I believe we are more and more able to identify with the Apostle Paul's self-assessment, "***Wretched man that I am...***" But I thank God and rejoice in knowing that my salvation isn't conditioned on this sinner or on his "***...little faith.***"

So, Christ continues then in verse 31 where we read: "***Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? ³²(For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things.***" This should bring to remembrance the words of Christ recorded earlier in this chapter when He was instructing them on the manner of prayer. He said back in verses 7 & 8: ***But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen (the Gentiles) do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. ⁸Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him.***" Again, He's telling them to not be like the heathen, consumed with the riches of their own self-righteousness or with thoughts centered on the necessities, riches and pleasures of this world. Christ is teaching us to recognize and live in light of our total dependence upon God for all things, both eternal and temporal.

So instead of serving that which is hostile to God's grace and His way of salvation (mammon), in verse 33, Christ commands us, ***But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.***" You know to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness denotes the precedence that those things above (our spiritual interests) are to have over the things of this earth (even over our concern for the future provisions necessary for life ó food, drink, and clothing). Our first priority is to seek the kingdom of God and His righteousness. In our study of this sermon up until now, we have seen that the kingdom of God refers to this reign of grace ó grace reigning through righteousness. As such, we truly do not seek the kingdom of God unless we also seek His righteousness. As Romans 14:17 tells us, "***... the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.***"

Sadly, most who desire to be included in the kingdom of heaven are ignorant of the very righteousness through which grace reigns in His kingdom. As Paul explains in the first verses of Romans 10, for one to be ignorant or not in submission to this rule or reign of righteousness, exposes that in spite of their religious zeal they are yet lost. He describes them as going about to establish a righteousness of their own in rivalry with the work of the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the end (or fulfillment) of the law for righteousness. So lest anyone mistakenly assume that merely because they are interested in going to heaven, that they might claim this verse as a promise to them that all these things (temporal or eternal) are going to be added unto them, Christ adds an important conjunction to further qualify that which identifies the kingdom of God that they are to seek. He says *“seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.”*

Also note that this first priority is to seek HIS righteousness, not our own. Remember Paul's words in Phillipians 3:7 where he wrote: *“But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ.”* And then in verse 9: *“And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith:”* Here in Matthew 6:33, Christ tells them how to seek the kingdom of God by seeking His righteousness, not their own. He had already established that the standard of righteousness was perfection back in Matthew 5:48. And Christ had already explained that this was why He came to fulfill every jot and tittle of the law (i.e. to dot every ð and cross every ð). It is the righteousness of another, the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a righteousness that far exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees. It is righteousness brought about by a Representative, a Substitute, a Surety, who obeyed the law and gave His life for the many. It is justifying righteousness brought about by a blood sacrifice for sins. It is the very righteousness of God revealed in the Gospel, and it is the basis upon which sinners are translated into the kingdom of God. And it is what keeps them there eternally. Nothing else will do this.

The efforts of lost sinners to keep the law (that is, to meet any condition or requirement so as to gain favor with God or procure His blessings) are no more than dead works and evil deeds to be repented of and these are not worthy to even be compared to the righteousness of His kingdom. To seek God's kingdom and righteousness any other way is a direct attack against God's redemptive glory in Christ for only in the person and work of Christ can God manifest both His mercy and His justice.

So of our own efforts, all are called to repent and instead to *“seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.”* And Christ says, *“..and all these things shall be added unto you.”* Trust Him in all things, temporal and eternal!

And we end this chapter in verse 34 with Christ saying, *“Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.”* In the instructions on the manner of prayer, you may recall that Christ said pray like this, *“Give us this day our daily bread.”* Here in verse 34 He says don’t be consumed with anxious thoughts about tomorrow. We’re to depend and trust upon God daily. He personifies tomorrow here and says, she’ll take care of herself because you have plenty to deal with today saying, *“Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof”*. That word *“evil”* when considered in the passive is translated *“troubles.”* He’s saying you’ve plenty of troubles to deal with today. Anxious worry will have no more effect on tomorrow than thinking about your height will make you any shorter or taller. Tomorrow, the same Lord will care for His own ó those who are identified by their seeking first His kingdom and His righteousness. Whatever troubles, trials or temptations might arise tomorrow, shouldn’t we trust and depend on the God who loved us so much that He gave His only begotten Son, who came and lived and died to insure the eternal well being of all whom He represented?

Well, are you among that number for whom He lived and died? In the first part of His sermon, Christ described for us identifying characteristics of these, the eternally blessed of God who inhabit His kingdom. Specifically, in chapter 5 vs. 6 He said, *“Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.”* Thank God if He has given you a hunger and thirst for His righteousness. And if you can’t yet identify with that description, then I pray that God would begin even today to draw you unto Himself and give you a hunger and a thirst for His righteousness. He will take care of His own ó not only their physical needs ó their physical food, drink, and clothing ó but He also will give them a hunger and thirst after His righteousness that Jesus Christ alone established. And it is He upon whom we feed ó upon whom we rely for all of our spiritual sustenance because what He accomplished, His righteousness, fills our need.

To be clothed in the robe of His righteousness, that is ó to have the perfect satisfaction that He made to God's law and justice (His perfect obedience as He walked this earth and the penalty for the sins of His people paid by the shedding of His own precious blood) ó to have that reckoned or imputed to your account) ó is to be clothed with garments so glorious, they are suitable for acceptance at the wedding feast ó before God Himself at the very throne of heaven. In Christ, based upon His work of righteousness, we find all we need ó we are filled!

So let our prayer be that God would grant us all grace to cast all our sinful concerns and anxious worries upon Him, that our priorities would be so ordered that our first thoughts and the first desires of our hearts might always be drawn to Him based upon His all-sufficient, justifying righteousness through which grace reigns in His kingdom. And may we grow in grace so as to take no thought for tomorrow, knowing as Paul recorded in Romans 14:8, *“For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord’s.”* And given the temptations to fall into neglect or become indifferent in our interest in the things of God, in attending to means of meeting together for worship, in prayer, in studying His word, in our zeal, etc. ó let's pray for one another that God would continually rekindle our hearts so that our desires to be found in His kingdom (and our interest in His kingdom, based upon His righteousness alone) might take precedence over all else.

“ó seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.”

Footnote from the author: While this sermon was prepared and delivered by me, I often utilize the commentaries, study helps, and teachings of others to supplement my own prayerful study of the scriptures. Since this document was not originally prepared for publication in print, please excuse and recognize that it was unfeasible to properly identify and credit all of the various original sources used to develop the content herein. Ultimately, it is my sincere and foremost objective to accurately present the gospel of God's grace found in the only infallible source, God's word itself ó the Bible.