

## **Red Letters** | The Sermons of Jesus Christ

### **Anxiety, Desire and the Kingdom of God**

Matthew 5.20, 5.48, 6.19-34

3.27.22

<sup>5.20</sup> "For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

"Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. <sup>20</sup> "But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; <sup>21</sup> for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

<sup>22</sup> "The eye is the lamp of the body; so then if your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light.

<sup>23</sup> "But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

<sup>24</sup> "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

<sup>25</sup> "For this reason I say to you, do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? <sup>26</sup> "Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they? <sup>27</sup> "And who of you by being worried can add a single hour to his life? <sup>28</sup> "And why are you worried about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, <sup>29</sup> yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these. <sup>30</sup> "But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more clothe you? You of little faith! <sup>31</sup> "Do not worry then, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear for clothing?' <sup>32</sup> "For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. <sup>33</sup> "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

<sup>34</sup> "So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

We've been looking at *The Sermon on the Mount*, Jesus Christ's best-known sermon and the CRUX of His philosophy. If you've been with us for part of the series you've probably thought, "Wow! This really IS a *non-stop collection* of famous words/phrases!"

Last week we reached the heart of the center of the core i.e. Jesus Christ's detour into prayer (*The Lord's Prayer* or *Our Father*) where He gives us six requests or petitions, three directed at

Heaven's priorities (Hallowed be Thy name, Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done) and then three requests for our earthly needs (Daily bread, forgiveness of sins, deliverance from evil). AND right in the middle, between the heavenward requests and earthly needs, is the CORE of the whole Sermon in the words, "*On earth as it is in heaven*".

Jesus Christ is uniting heaven and earth. At the end of time, earth and heaven will be one. And the ideal life that Jesus Christ offers to the world is the life that prays for and looks for signs and symptoms of that union... Even now, the New Creation is dawning and is overlapping with the old...He'll make all things New... If anyone is in Christ, he/she is a new creation. (2Cor 5.17)

Today, Jesus Christ's further opens up His idea of the chief good ("*summum bonum*"). He shows how the greater righteousness of the New Covenant, the Completeness of the Father ("*you will be complete as your heavenly Father is complete*" 5.48; see also 1 Peter 1.16), AND the future union of heaven and earth – how it all affects our STUFF...possessions, treasure, daily needs and our emotional responses/attitudes toward these things, especially anxiety, worry, fear, greed, desire and perspective.

**Let's look at: 1) Multiplicity is OUT**  
**2) Simplicity is IN**  
**3) Singularity is the KEY**

We live in an anxious age. I heard a political pundit recently describe our ever-present cell phones as the "Rectangle of Doom". We're alerted when someone has been kidnapped (almost always it's a custody dispute...just sayin'). We have less anxiety about finding directions when we drive...but we are now always at the center of the map...that's a heavy burden to bear.

Anxiety is for many people, pathological i.e. people are often worried sick. For young people, middle school, high school, college students there's been an enormous rise of pathological/obsessive worry.

Here's a bit of an article from *The Washington Post*: "Since 1985, the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA has been asking incoming college freshmen if they 'felt overwhelmed' ... The first year, 18 percent replied yes. By 2000, that climbed to 28 percent. By 2016, to nearly 41 percent. ("Why kids and teens may face far more anxiety these days;" Amy Ellis Nutt; Washington Post, May 10, 2018)

That article was written in 2018... before the global pandemic. I'm pretty sure that anxiety has not declined since then.

And while fears about the pandemic have definitely been an additional source of worry for young people and others, there are lots of possible new sources for the anxiety outbreak –

social media, inflation, war, the threat of war, pressures to “be your best self”... always getting better (almost there!).

I don't think I have to convince you about the rise OR list the possible causes behind this age of anxiety.

Here, Jesus speaks of money as a source of worry. He calls it “μαμωνᾶ” (Mammon – KJV Aramaic loan word) He's personifying wealth. Like it's a being...or a MASTER.

When we hear Jesus forbidding the storing up of treasure, our temptation is either to sort of explain away His words and soften them, like, “Well, He can't be prohibiting mortgages or insurance policies, retirement accounts, investments. Jesus couldn't possibly mean that. So this must be hyperbole and rhetoric against excesses... so, I think I'm ok.”

OR some have taken His words in a very wooden way as if, “No! We should take His words literally; He forbids not only insurance but even private ownership. And that would make life in modern So. FL impossible!” So, they reject Christianity as totally impractical OR they join a monastery or commune.”

And I'll leave it to each Christian to work through the many issues but I'll offer two guidelines. First, be bothered by what Jesus says and don't dismiss it. USE it to look at your attitude toward money. Be agitated. There are many forms of greed (Luke 12.15) and greed almost always escapes self-diagnosis. Few of us wonder where our next meal is coming from but that could NOT be said of the original audience OR literally billions of people in our modern world.

The other guideline is that financial worries are internally divisive; in fact, all worry fragments and divides our minds. We become double-minded when we have not enough to pay the two bills and have to choose one or the other.

We may think, “I'd LIKE to spend the money on THIS but I SHOULD spend the money on THAT...” The very word that's used here SIX TIMES for “worry” in Matthew' Greek begins with the letters “M-E-R-I-” as in meridian – the line that divides the earth into Eastern and Western Hemispheres. At the core of worry are the multiplicity of options complicating life and dividing our minds – “this way or that?”

Jesus Christ told the busy, bothered “servant” Martha, that she was “worried and bothered about so many things” (Luke 10.41)

Jesus doesn't want us to be inwardly divided because that IS NOT the whole and complete, full, mature, flourishing life He offers us. And when Jesus held up His idea of the truly Good Life, when He said, “You shall be complete as your heavenly Father is complete” (5.48) His offer is a life that's undivided and whole; as we've called it, the “integrated life”.

This whole section is about how stuff, possessions, treasure, daily bread, daily clothing, Mammon the Master – all these compete for our attention which is a central idea in worship – to give someone/-thing our attention. And Jesus uses proverbs, aphorisms, questions, illustrations to put our fragmented hearts and minds back together again – whole, undivided.

If your eye, your perspective, your outlook is CLEAR but the word is literally, “single” - *“The eye is the lamp of the body; so then if your eye is SINGLE, your whole body will be full of light.”* (22) If you see past all the swarm of priorities, all the consuming, distracting, alluring options and simplify your field of vision – your whole self will be full of light – full of truth and wisdom.

I counted eight imperative/command words in today’s text and each is coupled with reasons to obey. Stuff is subject to decay – eaten by moths (such a weak, fragile insect) or rust/mold, theft. BUT treasures in heaven are safe from decay. AND whatever you value supremely WILL claim your self: “where your treasure is there your heart will be also.”

When it comes to daily needs – don’t worry. Birds don’t worry. Flowers don’t worry...and they seem to do all right. Do you even see the birds anymore? Do you stop to smell the roses...or do you see that as a waste of time...and “time is money!”? (Two the commands are look at birds and learn from flowers.)

Simplify your life AS IF there were a God, a Heavenly Father who cares for nature... Know that neither birds nor fields were created in God’s image but YOU are – reason from lesser value to greater. Simplify. Worry is the way of practical atheism.

How DO you see? Is your eye clear to notice that God is caring for all of nature...put down your GPS; be reminded that you're not the center of the map.

And when it comes to God clothing the field (more glorious than even Solomon!) know that as long as the human race has needed clothing, God has been there saying, “I got you covered!”

The fig-leaves WE devised didn’t cover it... God gave us the skins of animals after our first disobedience. And that meant that our sin required the death of those animals. And “Don’t you see?” says Jesus in effect, “Don’t you see that I came from heaven and became one of you...a physical Being in need of food and clothing... and I will become the Animal you need for clothing... I will be treated as a Lamb... in order to cover your shame.”

“I will be stripped that YOU may be clothed. I will hang there between earth and heaven as they gamble for My clothing and I will be wearing YOUR sin and shame... I will be showered with human spit, wearing the emblem of shame...in order that YOU, everyone who has faith in Me (v. 30 “Will He not MUCH MORE clothe YOU Oh you of little faith?”) that everyone who believes in ME will lose his/her filthy rags and be clothed in MY RIGHTEOUSNESS!”

You will show up for the Eternal Wedding Feast and will be properly dressed in a righteousness YOU did not weave or sow or reap, the perfect righteousness of another that was given you as a gift: “But when the king came in to look over the dinner guests, he saw a man there who was not dressed in wedding clothes, and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you come in here without wedding clothes?' And the man was speechless. Then the king said to the servants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' (Mat 22.11-13)

There’s such a rich theology of clothing in the whole Bible... and in addition to the powerful logic Jesus Christ used in this passage – reasoning from lesser value to the greater (God clothes flowers – your value is far greater than flowers or birds) SO St. Paul reasons from greater to lesser: “If God did not withhold His own Son but freely gave Him for YOU, then how will God withhold the lesser things – won’t He give you all you need?” (Rom 8.32)

And believers in Jesus should use this logic on our easily divided hearts. We are given in Jesus Christ, all we need for life and godliness (2Peter 1.3). We’re given a new identity as children of the King. We live in a state of forgiveness and that instills in us, as we believe it, an ability to forgive others. The stuff that the world tells us we “have to have” when compared to a friendship with God that has no outstanding debt... infinite relief...love and acceptance, importance and ...glory like all the orchids and wildflowers... far more significant and cherished than even the greatest king. And when that HITS us... we can simplify life.

Live simply that others may simply live – good motto.

We’re given new eyes to see needs around us and respond with generosity and self-forgetfulness. We are NOT ultimately responsible for our well being and flourishing – Someone else has us covered.

Mammon is a cruel task-master. He’s never satisfied but the believer in Jesus is liberated from the love of money – A ROOT of all kinds of evil and all kinds of worries. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. (1Tim 6.10) And I can look out on the world and see myself as the Junior Partner in a worldwide organization called, “Creator and Sons” – that I’m here to mirror our Father’s outrageous generosity to a world that’s captivated by STUFF serving the great Tyrant called MAMMON.

But the simplicity I’m describing is NOT simply a matter of disciplined spending habits and responsible budgeting – that’s good and I heartily commend it to you...but there is a deeper motivation here.

Singularity is the key. In some sense Jesus Christ is saying to His disciples: “I want you to travel light on your journey from earth to heaven... live simply (and I realize I’m not talking to a

congregation in Ethiopia or Mumbai... most of us could afford to simplify a lot more and so be freer from the worries of Mammon) but it's even simpler than simple – it's single!

It's like there's only ONE command in the Kingdom of Jesus Christ: "Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness and all these things will be added to you."

If we are the Beatitude People – poor in spirit (morally weak and needy) and mourning our own lack of love and the sin of the whole world and if we hunger for a quality of rightness we just can't generate by will-power or good intentions and IF WE'VE BEEN GIVEN a right standing with God based on what Jesus did FOR us... then every day...we simply LIVE OUT OF THAT REALITY. That's the solid platform from which I operate each day.

I live "in the now" because tomorrow will have troubles of its own...and today, I'm praying that prayer, "Hallowed be Thy Name, Thy Kingdom come" and I really have only one thing on my plate today: to seek God's Kingdom.

Jesus told Martha – "you're worried and bothered about so many things...but only a few things are necessary (see? SIMPLICITY!) really only ONE... Mary has chosen that and no one will take it away from her." REALLY ONLY ONE – singularity.

Maybe in response to this sermon some would decide to make a better budget – great (really).

But the main thing, the ONLY thing, is to live by faith (v. 30 "You of little faith") seeking to know God, the King, through the righteousness that comes by faith in Jesus Christ. (HIS righteousness)

Wake up tomorrow and pray that prayer. It's a simple life (so many complications are put to rest) and even better, it's a singular life.

Every obsession on this terrestrial ball leads to destruction – obsessed with your kids, obsessed with your job, your looks, your success, your pleasure...your retirement...health. But one obsession, from outside this world, leads to the True Life of Human Flourishing – seek first the Kingdom of God and you'll become the real you that God made you to be.