

Matthew 6:25-34 Greed

The Sermon on the Mount

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Bible Text: Matthew 6:25-34

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We are back in the Sermon on the Mount right now and we are going to take a third week on the issue of stewardship. [?] today. You never know who I am going to see out there. We are doing a third week on the week of stewardship and it is kind of rare for me. I kind of felt like we finished the topic last week, but it just... I felt like it needed another swing.

And some of you may start to think that you are in the book *To Kill A Mockingbird*. Do you remember when Scout goes to church with Calpurnia and they are trying to raise money for the family that lost their father and the preacher stands up and he says, "Lock the door. Nobody is leaving here until we get 10 dollars in the offering plate."

Do you all remember that?

There is not a number in mind that I am going to keep preaching on stewardship until we get to. That is not what is going on. It is not a financial decision at all. It is this. It is that generosity and not simply—and not even primarily—generosity with your money, but generosity with your time and with your energy and with your life, this knowledge that you belong to the Lord and everything that you have belongs to the Lord. It is appropriate for a Christian. The message of the Bible is that God has spent lavishly on you. He has given his Son for you. He has been... literally, he has been prodigal in spending all of his most valuable, most treasured thing for you. And it is appropriate for you to be lavish in your grace and in your generosity with your time and with your energy and with your life.

I also preach out of it because it is dangerous. I think we live in a dangerous culture when we can be enslaved to our greed and not even know it. As a matter of fact, I think that is where most of us live. Most of us are enslaved to greed, enslaved to self and selfishness and we don't even know it.

And so I am going to take another swing at this text and I promise it will be the last swing I take at this one for a while.

Hear the Word of the Lord from Matthew chapter six verses 24 through 34, a frightening verse at the beginning.

“No one can...” no one is able. It is impossible.

No one can serve two masters, for 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, 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 his span of life? And 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. 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.¹

All men are like grass and all of our glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the Word of God stands forever. So let’s give our attention to it.

Growing up it was a minor holiday in my house when Miss America was on television. It was something not to be missed and even when I moved to Mississippi one of the first parties I was invited to was a Miss America party and it was kind of funny. Although at that point I had kind of grown out of it and all I couldn’t deal was I was missing the LSU Auburn game and was mad about that. But I remember those pageants in my mind and one of those strongest memories is of the interview portion.

You know, and the questions were always the same, right? You know, what is your dream? What do you long to see? And the answers were always these big and beautiful, flowery, “I dream of a world where no child will go to bed in fear and no one would wake up hungry.”

And you think to yourself, “Ok, if that is really your dream, what has that got to do with the eight hours a day you spent, you know, perfecting your body and perfecting your talent and the Saran wrap that you have got on under that evening gown. Do you know what I mean? Come on. Let’s just be honest here. That is not really what you are into.

¹ Matthew 6:23-34.

And yet we know every word they spoke was scripted and we know that there is something in that answer that resonates. And we see that even more when we have someone give us a truthful answer, you know, when we ask a friend at a reunion or something, “So what do you do? What is your dream?”

And he is like, “Man, I just want to make as much money as I can so I can retire quick.”

And we think, “Ok, I believe that. That is true. That is true of most people I know,” but it is dirty. It is wrong. This idea that everything I am doing is for me, that I am living for this little kingdom. It seems wrong.

Why? Why is it that the honest answer that would be honest for most people seems wrong and the flowery, almost ridiculable answer that is true for nobody feels so right?

I think there is a reason for that. God created a good world. And he created this world where there will be peace and there will be grace and it was righteous. And what Adam and Eve did and what we have done and what every human being ever since has done is removed God from the throne of that world. We have removed the king and kicked him out of the garden and we have made a decision instead to live for the kingdom of self. This is the kingdom that I seek, the kingdom of my pleasure, the kingdom of my wealth, the kingdom of my security. That is the kingdom that I live for. And what Jesus came to do is to come into the world to free us from ourselves, to say, “You living for yourself is destructive and it is wearing you out and it is frenetic and I can give you rest from that.”

And he took the throne back. And right now we are living in a period where there are two thrones and there are two kingdoms side by side fighting it out. And it is even more stark than World War II. You have to be on one side or the other. You can't even be like Switzerland and be neutral, because to be neutral is to be selfish and that is to declare your allegiance. You will either the King Christ and seek his kingdom and his righteousness, his putting everything back together, or you will seek your own kingdom and your own comfort and your own pleasure. Those are your only two options.

And the first thing we have to do is we have to decide which kingdom we are in and we decide that by which kingdom we seek. What do we live for is a decision we make every day.

And what Jesus in this text tells us is living for the kingdom of self is too small for you. You were created for something bigger than that, something better than that. And if you only live for that, you will get crushed and you will lose all your security and you will die in death and anxiety.

On the other hand he says, there his my kingdom, the kingdom that brings peace from worry, the kingdom that brings confident assurance that when you have Christ you have enough. But living for that kingdom demands faith because it is always the opposite of what you expect.

Jesus says, "You want to have enough? Give everything away generously."

He says, "You want to get a lot done this week? Take one day to rest and stop."

He says, "You want a life of joy? Then learn self denial."

It is seen as the opposite of what you expect. He says he has come to free us from the frenetic life of seeking to meet our every want and need by calling us to a life of glory and purpose. He says that by saying, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."²

The first thin I want to tell you is I want to be like the Cheshire cat. When Alice goes into Wonderland she says, "Which path should I take?"

And the Cheshire cat says, "Well, that depends on where you want to go."

And she says, "I don't care where I want to go. I don't know where I want to go."

And the cat says, "I don't care which path you take."

The path you take determines where you go. What you seek determines what you find. You cannot serve God and money. You can't

What does he say? He says, "Don't seek after these things, what shall we eat? What shall we drink? What shall we where? Don't seek after money. What shall we eat? Do not seek after pleasure. What shall we drink? Do not seek after beauty. What shall we wear? The pagans, they hyper seek those things."

It is an interesting word. It combines... it is hyper it is episeek. They frenetically run after these things.

But your Father knows you need them, relax. You seek the kingdom of God. What you seek determines what you find. You can't serve both. You can't have both. You can't.

Ok this point is going to be problematic for some of you. What I am saying, I will make it as stark as I possibly can. You cannot be a Christian and be greedy. Ok? Let me say it to you more starkly. If you are greedy, you are going to hell. Ok? Is that stark enough? You have got to be saved from that. You cannot live for money. You can't. It cannot be the driving force in your life. If it is, then Jesus is not the driving force in your life. If it is, then it is your god and you will die seeking it. And I am not kidding and I am not making this up.

We Christians live in this false idea, weak, American white Christians live with this false idea that you can be a Christian and be greedy. We really do. We think that that is ok. It

² Matthew 6:33.

might be unseemly, but it is acceptable to have a life that is defined by the accruing of wealth. We even have developed very American forms of Christianity that are all designed to use God to get you wealth. We have these great American books about how I became wealthy because God liked me. And it is a lie. It is a lie that is destroying souls.

I have a friend who raises money for ministry for a living. That is what he does. And he was telling me about one of his visits. I like to hear his stories. And he went to see a friend of high school, made a ton of money with his business. It is in four cities now. He said he went in and he sat down at the guy's office and the guy started talking about, you know, what he is doing, how well he has been doing.

He said, "What are your plans?"

He said, "Well, I am opening up three more offices. I am going to be coast to coast."

And he said, "Really?"

My friend, "I asked a question I probably shouldn't have asked. I said, 'So how much is going to be enough?'"

And he said, "Well, you know, it is never really enough, I mean... I guess, you know, when I get to 100 million, when my company is worth 100 million, I would really like to get to that point because at that point you either get bought by some other company and then you really make serious money or you can begin to buy other companies."

And he said, "So what does your family think about it?"

"Oh, my wife thinks I put too much work into it, but she doesn't complain about the house she lives in and she is never home anyway. I mean, she is a full time lawyer."

He started asking questions about the children, but he couldn't really go into that. He just didn't enjoy that question.

At the end of the conversation with him I said, "Well, so, how much money did you raise from this guy? I mean, let's say something about him, right?"

He said, "I didn't ask any money from him. I would never ask money from a pagan. I don't want anyone to give me money who is not a Christian. I don't want anyone to support this ministry who is not a Christian."

I said, "Well, he is a Christian. You went to church with him. You know what church he goes to."

He said, "No." He got kind of inflamed at this point. He said, "He is not a Christian. He worships money. He is an idolater and he is sacrificing his children on the altar of that pagan God."

Do you understand? That is the way the New Testament talks about greed.

1 Corinthians 5:11 says, "Do not associate with any person, do not associate with any person who claims to be a Christian and is sexually immoral or a drunkard or greedy, which is idolatry. Don't even associate with them."

Greed is idolatry. It is worshipping something else. This idea that the world is here for you is an idolatrous idea. It is wrong.

And we want to go, "Oh, yeah, well, ok, it is bad, but you can be a Christian. All you have to do to be a Christian is confess Jesus as Lord. That is what Paul says in Romans 10, right? If anyone confesses with his mouth that Jesus is Lord and believes in his heart God raised him from the dead, he will be saved. So to be a Christian all you have to do is confess that and you can be as greedy and as wealthy as you want, right?"

No.

What book is that again?

No, man. I just told you. What book is it, Bo? Romans. Written in the first century. What did it mean to confess Jesus as Lord in the first century Rome? It meant you were confessing that someone else wasn't Lord. Who were you confessing was not Lord? Caesar. You would not light the incense and say, "Kaiser Kairos, Caesar is Lord."

And if you would not light that incense, you were kicked out of the aristocracy. You were kicked out of the trade guilds. It had devastating financial ramifications. It had devastating social ramifications and in times of persecution it could mean death.

That is what it means to confess Jesus as Lord. You can't do that if you are greedy.

It is a cancer. It is a cancer in the culture, in the air that we breathe. It is a cancer in the air that we breathe. Seeking the kingdom of self leads us away from Christ and it destroys us. Seeking the kingdom of self is frenetic. Jesus says the pagans hyper seek after them because it is never enough, because money is always insecure. How much money do you need to be secure? I don't know. How much money does it take to build an oil well that explodes? How much money was lost on Thursday when somebody made a computer error and the stock market had the biggest drop in its history? How much money does it take to be secure? How sure are you those mutual funds are going to be ok?

Money will never be secure. Seeking pleasure will never ultimately give you pleasure. Seeking pleasure gives you hangovers. Seeking beauty is never secure. It leads to never ending maintenance.

My wife just read this book *I Feel Bad about my Neck* by Nora Effron. And she is talking about aging and how it is affecting her beauty and she says this. She talks about how it is called on maintenance, what she does to protect her beauty. She says, “What I know is that I spend a huge amount of time with my finger in the dike and that does not begin to include all the things I promised not to go into, the pathetic things. I have done a number of things that fall just short of plastic surgery. I even had all the fillings in my mouth replaced with white material and I swear to God it took six months off my age. From time to time my dermatologist shoots a hypodermic needle, something called [?] into my chin and It fills the saggy parts. I have had Botox twice and a wrinkle in my forehead. Once I had my lips plumped up with a fat injection but I looked like [?] and so I never did it again. Or the other day on the street I passed a homeless woman. I have never understood the feminists who insisted they were terrified of becoming bag ladies, but as I watched this woman shuffle down the street I understood. I am never going to be a bag lady, but I am only eight hours a week away from looking exactly like that woman on the street with frizzled, fly away gray hair I would probably have it I stopped dying mine, with a pot belly I would definitely develop if I ate just half of what I think about eating every day, with the dirty nails and the chapped lips and the mustache and the bushy eyebrows. It would be my destiny if I spent two weeks on a desert island.

“Eight hours a week and counting. By the time I reach my 70s I am sure it will take at least twice as long. The only consolation I have in any of this is that when I am very old I will at least have something to do.”

It is a never ending fight that you are going to lose. You are going to lose. If you live for beauty, if you live for wealth, you will never find peace. You will never find rest. And Jesus has come to say, “I have got something better. Come to me if you are tired and weary and find rest. Find rest for your souls. Let my wealth be your wealth. Let my security be your security. Let me have your children. Let me be the voice that tells you you are beautiful. Become my daughter... be my daughter and become a princess. I have got something better. Stop running frenetically. Stop running, hyper seeking after something that will never fill you. Come to me and rest.”

Notice how Jesus just piles up arguments. He doesn't draw the stark contrast and say, “No, you must not be like that. You are like this. You seek the kingdom of heaven.”

Instead he comes to us with tenderness and he piles up arguments. He reminds you your Father in heaven doesn't forget to feed the birds. You can trust him. He doesn't forget to dress the flowers. He dresses them beautifully. You can trust him. He is not going to fail to take care of you. And he comes to you and he reminds us. He says, “So seek God's kingdom. Seek it. Trust me. It will bless you.”

He reminds us. Instead of scolding us, he reminds us. And we need that reminder. We need that reminder because we live among the nations. We live in a place where we are addicted to greed because there is no ceiling.

In former generations, in former times you had a field and you plowed your field and that is what you did. And so if you wondered what you were going to do next year, you were going to plow that field. And if someone asked you, "How much is enough?" you say, "Well, when the field is plowed, that is enough. That is enough."

When does the work get done? When it is plowed.

But we live in a time when you can always make more. You can always make more. And you are looking around and everybody is lying to you telling you they are making more, so you have got to make more to keep up. And there is no ceiling to where our greed can go. We live in a time when there is no ceiling to how many good times we can have. We live in a time when we make excuses to party.

Do you realize we go year round with some reason to party? America has co-opted every national holiday I listened to this hilarious interview the other day from this Irishman. He is the lead singer of the Chieftains—or the lead accordion player or whatever they have—and he is from Ireland, but he has to every Saint Patrick's Day in America. And the guy said, "Well, why?"

He said, "Well, there is no money to be made in Ireland on Saint Patrick's Day because there is no parties." He said, "In Ireland on Saint Patrick's Day we go to church and worship. It is a religious holiday. The pubs are only open for one hour in Ireland on Saint Patrick's Day. In America you wake up drunk. There is money to be made here."

We co-opt them and we totally change them.

I saw this hilarious thing on... I can't tell you what it was on because you will get mad at me. But it was on the daily show and it was a guy going around on Cinco de Mayo asking people if they were Mexican. You know, and he was kind of making fun of the Arizona law and telling people, "Can you prove you are American?"

And you go up to these people with sombreros and he said, "Well, they spoke broken English because they were drunk and they were, you know, drinking these huge margaritas." And he said, "Well, are you Mexican? Can you prove you are American?"

And they will get furious. "Of course I am American."

Why are you celebrating a day you don't even understand?

We are looking for excuses. The good times never run out. There is no limit to how many reasons you can party. There is no limit to how much money you can make. There is no limit to how much consumerism you can experience.

The question, "What shall we wear?" never has an end. We are not even controlled by how fast you can sew.

There is this fascinating book called *American Mania*. It is about this intellectual light weight at UCLA named Peter Weibrow. He is an MD and PhD in neurological studies which means he knows the brain better than I do.

And he says he can prove neurologically that Americans as a culture are addicted to shopping. He says what goes on in an American's brain when they purchase something new is almost identical to what goes on in a crack addict's brain when they get crack. He says, "We don't call it an addiction because it is culture wide."

I didn't believe that until I put a cell phone in the hands of my son. He changed. He changed. We are addicted to shopping. We are addicted to stuff. And it is producing this frenetic pace that is wearing us out.

We need Jesus' tenderness because our culture makes this sin difficult, because our own sin makes it difficult, because I wake up every morning obsessed with the kingdom of Ricky. You wake up with your own kingdom, too.

Do you know what you did this morning before church? A lot of you argued. You argued over getting to church on time. And the reason why you argued over getting to church on time was because you thought it would look bad to be late and looking bad was a worse for you than hating the person you have taken a vow to love. She was conflicting with your kingdom.

And I am going to baseball games and these coaches are standing in my way and I have this opportunity to either see them as an opportunity to bring someone into the kingdom of God or remove them and defeat them and destroy them and argue them down and intimidate them back because they are obstacles to the kingdom of Ricky.

Those are the decisions we have every day, every day. Our sin, our culture all make this not living for wealth, living for... seeking the kingdom of God difficult. And it is difficult because it is counter intuitive. I mean, everything Jesus says, it doesn't make sense. It is a screw that goes the wrong way. Have you ever had a reverse threaded screw in your life?

I was trying to change the lawnmower blade in my lawnmower several years ago and it was... I was just tightening and I was pushing and pushing and trying to loosen this thing and the screw wouldn't come loose and I WD 40'd it and I got a cheater bar and I was about to break my wrench because I had so much torque on this wrench to get this screw off. And my next door neighbor came by and goes, "Oh..."

He actually heard me cussing is what he did. That was before I became a Christian.

And he said, "Ricky, you know, those are usually reverse threaded, don't you?"

And I said, "Yeah, I was just trying to get it good and tight so it wouldn't come off."

I turned it the other way and it came off because to get it off up I had to screw it down and that made no sense. And Jesus' entire kingdom is a reverse threaded screw. It is backwards. Do you want to define life? Then take up your cross and die to yourself.

Do you want to have enough? Do you want to be absolutely secure in having enough? Then give generously. Do you want to be beautiful? Stop looking in a mirror. Start looking at other people and serving them and they will think you are beautiful. Get involved with the life of another. Make being a mother the way you are in life, not just to your children.

There is a great line in Tom Wolf's novel *Bonfire of the Vanities* where he is describing all these women in this room, all these women who are obsessed with their appearance and he says, "Not one of them looked like a mother. Not one of them looked like they cared about anybody but themselves."

You want to be beautiful to somebody? Love them and give yourself to somebody.

The kingdom of God is counter intuitive. It is the opposite of what you expect. And if it is so opposite, then how do we seek it.

I realize some of you are following in your bulletin right now and you are thinking, "Good night. He is still on the first point."

I threw that outline away on Friday. Don't worry. We are almost done. This is the last point. Take a breath. We will be done by 11:30, ok?

How do we seek his kingdom and his righteousness? His kingdom, the king's dominion. This sovereign rule, his righteousness, his rule over our life. This is not seeking after imputed righteousness. This is not seeking after grace. You can't seek after grace. Grace is poured upon you. You can't seek after having a dump truck dumped on you. Jesus did that already. That is taken care of. This is seeking after... this is sanctification if you are into long words. It is life. It is going after. It is making yourself holy.

And how do you do that? I would suggest two ways. First of all, this is a very important. To seek after God's kingdom and his righteousness means you realize that 1000 small decisions equals one very big one. Giving your last bit of energy to the kids instead of to your husband, that is not that bad a decision unless you make it every day, then you are breaking your wedding vows. Making one more decision to go out with the guys instead of staying at home to help with the kids, it is not that big of a decision unless you do it every week. Then it is breaking your wedding vows.

To choose to make that devastating decision that it is more important to be right in an argument than it is to listen to this person who is the image of God and someone that I am supposed to love, making that decision is a small decision unless you make it every day, 10 times a day. Making that decision to just... I just want to think about myself right

now. I just need a little self time. This is what is best for me. That is a small decision unless you make that decision every day.

Making the decision to spend this little extra bit of money to go on this one more trip this year, to do this one more thing, just to spend it on myself, just a little pamper called the latte effect. You pamper yourself with a five dollar coffee is no big deal unless you do it everyday. Then it is what? Fifteen hundred dollars.

A thousand small decisions equals a big one. A thousand decisions to seek your own kingdom equals the big one of not seeking God's kingdom and his righteousness. We have to realize the importance of the small decisions. But, secondly, I think there is a parallel here. Jesus says, "Don't be like the pagans who are all constantly worrying and running saying, 'What shall we eat? What shall we drink? What shall we wear?'"

I think there is a pattern there we can take. We should seek righteousness. We should seek the kingdom of God the way pagans seek after money, pleasure and beauty. How do the pagans seek after money? They get up in the morning early and they work hard for it. And the first thing they are thinking about when they wake up in the morning is their job. But I guarantee you it hasn't always been that way.

I am raising four boys right now and I promise you none of them wake up in the morning thinking, "Work, I got to get to work." Not one of them. Not one of them wakes up thinking, "I have got to make money today."

Spend? Yes. Ask from daddy, maybe, but not make.

At some point along the way you learned to worry. At some point along the line you realized that it felt good to make a little money. And you became obsessed with it. And I want to encourage you, beg you, plead with you, tell you, make you, force you, I don't know. Whatever. Seeking after God can be that pleasurable. It can be. Do it. Do it rigorously. Seek after him until you find pleasure in it and it becomes what you want to do. Seek after him. Spend time with him until it becomes fun, until it becomes what you miss. Seek after righteousness the way the pagans seek after beauty, continually, throughout the day. Don't spend your time looking at the mirror and freshening up your face. Spend your time looking at the Bible and freshening up your soul.

Spend your time... oh, that was cheesy. Strike that from the tape.

Find ways to pray through the day. That is what the great Christians of the past have done. Whenever you wash your hands, pray the Lord would wash you with his blood. Whenever you hug your children pray for them. Whenever you pass somebody in the street, someone cuts you off in traffic, don't curse them, bless them.

Martin Luther had great prayers. He went up through the day. He prayed so often that he began to feel guilty that he prayed when he was relieving himself. He felt like it was

inappropriate. He came up with a funny prayer to allow that to happen. I will tell you what that was someday when I am not on tape.

But pray during the day. Be creative in how you seek it out.

How do pagans find parties? They are creative in coming up with a reason to party. Be creative in finding short bursts to be with the Lord. Be creative to find long times with the Lord. Be creative in how you look for vacations with the Lord. Be creative in planning your vacation so that worship is a part of it. Creatively seek his kingdom. Creatively seek people who need you.

I do want to end with a Mother's Day exhortation. Your opportunity to mother is in no way limited by whether or not you are married or by whether or not you are barren or by whether or not your children are grown. You live surrounded by people who need mothering. They need your love. They need your time. They need somebody to care for them. The most fruitful human being to ever live is the Lord Jesus Christ and he was single. The apostle Paul had no wife, but he had children all over Corinth and all over the world.

And who can you give your life to? Don't get sucked into the feeling of—I say this with grace—don't get sucked into a feeling of what you don't have. Instead, see the world as full of opportunity for people for you to love. The kingdom of heaven, it is all around you. Seek it. Seek it creatively. Seek those you can help, those you can bless. Seek it and find life.

Please pray with me.