

Matthew 6:24–34

²⁴ “No one can serve two masters. He will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon. ²⁵ “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat (or drink), or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? ²⁶ Look at the birds in the sky; they do not sow or reap, they gather nothing into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are not you more important than they? ²⁷ Can any of you by worrying add a single moment to your life-span? ²⁸ Why are you anxious about clothes? Learn from the way the wild flowers grow. They do not work or spin. ²⁹ But I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was clothed like one of them. ³⁰ If God so clothes the grass of the field, which grows today and is thrown into the oven tomorrow, will he not much more provide for you, O you of little faith? ³¹ So do not worry and say, ‘What are we to eat?’ or ‘What are we to drink?’ or ‘What are we to wear?’ ³² All these things the pagans seek. Your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. ³³ But seek first the kingdom (of God) and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides. ³⁴ Do not worry about tomorrow; tomorrow will take care of itself. Sufficient for a day is its own evil.

Context

To this point the Sermon on the Mount has been quite structured: eight Beatitudes, six antitheses and three acts of piety. The final major section of the Sermon (6:19–7:29) has no discernable structure – rather it is akin to a wisdom book in which short units are placed together because of their similar content or catchwords. It features commands, illustrations, reflections and summary conclusion ([7:12](#)).

This final section of the Sermon (6:19–7:29) gives advice regarding the Christian pursuit of holiness – *be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect* (5:48) – and the basic advice never varies: trust God. The basic theme is expressed as the decision for or against God (esp. see [7:13-27](#)). The section (Mt [6:19-24](#)) which immediately precedes our gospel is replete with dualistic comparisons:

treasures on earth	treasures in heaven
the present	the eschatological future
temporary goods that may be lost	permanent goods that endure
clear eye and life in the light	bad eye and confused life in the dark
serving things	serving God

In each case there is the implied choice for God which echoes the OT clarion call: “*I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live, by loving the LORD, your God, heeding his voice, and holding fast to him*” (Dt 30:19–20).

The major topics of this final, larger portion (6:19–7:29) of the Sermon, bear some relation to the “we/us-petitions” in the Lord’s Prayer (6:9-13):

- trust in God to provide food and clothing (“*Give us today our daily bread*”),
- avoiding the condemnation of others (“*as we forgive our debtors*”),
- approaching God as Father with our requests (“*Our Father in heaven*”), and
- traveling the narrow and hard way (“*deliver us*”).

Just as the Lord’s Prayer emphasizes our dependence upon and trust in God, the implications of the decision to trust God and chose for Him is the starting point (v.24) of our Sunday’s gospel. Once the disciple has chosen for God, for Christ, that does not mean that problems are gone or the way is smooth. This often gives rise to anxiety about the choices one has made and the consequences of that choice.

Commentary

Matthew 6:24–34 can be understood as an interweaving of commands against anxiety and materialism with commands to believe that God will meet one’s material needs. Given the recurring theme of daily sustenance throughout all of this chapter of Matthew (6:8b, 11, 25, 31) one easily recalls the Lord’s Prayer, “*Give us today our daily bread*” (v.11) – but is there a particular context for Matthew’s community which heightens even the daily dependence upon God? The majority of scholars places Matthew’s community in the period after the destruction of Jerusalem/the Temple when rabbinic Judaism was seeking to assert its leadership upon the standard of orthodoxy. What is less clear is the degree to which this emerging Judaic orthodoxy considered the nascent Christianity as separatist and heretics (cf. *Birkath ha-Minim*). Assuming the local synagogue was hostile to the Matthew’s community, that would imply a separation from the community within which the Jewish-Christians had lived – socially and economically. To suddenly be separated (if that was what happened) then the anxiety levels about “daily bread” would have been heightened. Perhaps that lays in the background of the five-fold use of *merimnaō* (worry, be anxious) in our passage.

Choose God

“No one can serve two masters. He will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.”

The word *serve* (*douleiō*) always implies compulsory service and thus the practice of slavery or indentured servitude is the background for the statement (cf. Luke 16:13). Jesus’ point is simple: a slave/servant cannot successfully and wholeheartedly serve two masters, since slavery demands the total, undivided attention of the slave to the master. If there are two masters, their demands will be incompatible. Similarly, Jesus’ disciples cannot divide their loyalties between the reign of God and earthly treasures – one must choose.

That choice does not mean an active dislike of the one not chosen. Jesus employs a Semitic idiom opposites (*hate...love...devoted...despise*) whose point is to have undivided loyalties. When a person chooses God and God’s reign, that does not mean the alternative is evil and to be hated. In Jesus’ exhortation the rival to God is *mammon* – an Aramaic expression which simply means possessions. One can reasonably ask why Matthew does not simply use the Greek *ousia* = (property, money, wealth)? Perhaps it was to echo the Palestinian Targums to Deuteronomy 6:5, ‘You shall love Yahweh your God with ... all your mammon’. With this as a background, a Christian need not avoid possessions, but they must avoid materialism as an idolatrous rival to the one true God. The French philosopher Jacques Ellul points out that in this text, Jesus personifies *mammon* “as a sort of god,” a force that is competing with God for our souls. Ellul suggests that Jesus’ choice of words “reveals something exceptional about money, for Jesus did not usually use deifications and personifications. What Jesus is revealing is that money is a power.” Something all too clear in our own day. Wealth, money, can become one’s master/lord – a breaking of the first commandment. Perhaps “MasterCard” is more prophetic with its name than they intended.

Certainly Francis of Assisi comes to mind as someone who shunned wealth and possessions in order to devote himself wholeheartedly to God. He stands in contrast to many TV evangelists who offer a “prosperity gospel,” a kind of Christian materialism – one that assures people that God blessings are material blessings of wealth and security. But St Francis does not stand alone – many leaders in past revival movements have warned that Christians ought not to pray for conversion if they want to hold on to their money, because we cannot have both. For John Wesley, defying material prosperity was part of holiness, a movement to God away from the things the world valued. He warned that riches would increase believers’ conformity to the world and attacked those who preached in favor of the accumulation of wealth. Wesley chose to live as simply as possible so as to give all else to the poor,

and called on his followers to do the same. In contrast to most contemporary Western Christians, Wesley felt that “stewardship means giving to the poor. . . . *We give to God not by giving to the church, but by giving to the poor*”. If one did not give all one could, Wesley taught, one was in disobedience to Jesus’ teaching and would end up lost.

What! Me Worry?

Earlier in the chapter, Jesus had talked about treasures on earth (6:19). In all truth, we not only have possessions, we protect them, we even buy them their own houses (storage units). We lock our doors and windows; many families have sophisticated alarm systems to protect ourselves and our treasures. We put our money in banks. We have insurance policies on our treasures so that we can replace them. We are an anxious people.

And it is not only people with possessions. People can be anxious about what they do not have.

Merimnaō (‘to be anxious’) refers essentially to a state of mind wherein the conflict with faith arises. Worry is the antithesis of a practical trust in God – which is the meaning of faith (*pistis*) in Matthew’s gospel (cf. 8:10; 9:2, 22, 29; 15:28, 17:20; 21:21). Those who worry show their “lack of faith.” Matthew only uses *merimnaō* two other times: in 13:22 the thorns which choke the good seed represent the “*worldly anxiety and the lure of riches*”, while in 10:19 disciples being handed over are told not to worry as God will provide (the words they are to say).

Yet the life of a first century itinerant preacher and his disciples is somewhat distant from modern life with 9-to-5 jobs and mortgages. The concern for tomorrow – condemned in v.34 – is firmly built into our commercial and economic structures, and even with the NT we find harsh words for those who do not make appropriate provisions: “*And whoever does not provide for relatives and especially family members has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever*” (1 Tim 5:8). But sensible provision and worry are not the same thing. The focus of our gospel passage is on faith and its opposite rather than on the specifics of economic planning – it is *worry* about tomorrow, not provisioning for tomorrow which v.34 condemns. To forbid ‘anxiety’ does not rule out a responsible concern and provision for one’s own and others’ material needs, nor does Jesus here forbid us to work (see below). As before, the concern is with losing one’s priorities

God provides the basics

This theme is important to the passage (vv. 25-26, 28-30). Jesus twice uses a standard type of Jewish argument traditionally called *qal wahomer* – “how much more?” (vv. 26, 30). If God cares for birds and for perishable flowers, how much more for his own beloved children?

The objects of our anxiety, food and drink, are to be seen as less important than the *life* and the *body* which they supply, and subsequent verses will draw out the moral that, since God provides the latter, he can be trusted for the former. If God sustains life and protects the bodies of those who serve him, they should not complain if he provides for those things without giving a nod to the symbols of status that the culture ordains. If God provides for the birds and flowers, how much more will he provide for his children?

The first of the concerns mentioned in food (v.25) and is addressed by means of an illustration from nature. The birds do not sow or reap, but they have to spend a lot of energy in hunting or searching for their food, but the point is that it is there to be found. What is prohibited is worry, not work. God provides.

The second illustration from nature is even more far-reaching, in that not only are wild flowers more passive than birds, yet here we are not concerned with their survival (*grows today and is thrown into the oven tomorrow* – v.30), but their magnificence – beyond the best that human art can achieve. God

lavishes upon them a craftsman's care that is the envy of kings. Yet their destiny is the cooking stoves as fuel – a somewhat ignoble end to such art. Human beings are the capstone of God's creation and God has lavished upon us the *imago Dei*. Such art work has not an ignoble end, but is destined, in faith, to the kingdom of heaven – those who embrace a practical trust in God's providence. Those who will not embrace such a trust are *oligopistoi* – literally “of little faith.”

Seek the Kingdom

³³ *But seek first the kingdom (of God) and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides.* ³⁴ *Do not worry about tomorrow; tomorrow will take care of itself. Sufficient for a day is its own evil.*

The *de facto* people of little faith – the pagans of v.32 – seek after (*epizētēō*) anxiously the things of the world. People of faith are also to seek (*zētēō*) but the object of their seeking is far different. They seek the kingdom of God and righteousness – both key themes throughout the Sermon on the Mount. Both these terms represent the distinctive lifestyle of the disciples – something they do and something for which they “*hunger and thirst*” (5:6). The disciple's deepest desire and resolve must be to live in God's ways.

The closing verse (v.34) reminds the audience that needless anxiety is just that needless – God provides for the things that you need (not “wants”). But as we have already mentioned, Scripture admonishes believers to plan and provide for tomorrow. We are called to do what is ours to do and not idly wait for God to deliver all our needs. *Sufficient for a day is its own evil*. All are cautioned that to live only for today – an attitude condemned by Paul in 1 Cor 15:32 (cf. Is 22:13, 56:12) – is hardly the intent of the passage. Rather than “Live, Eat, Pray” perhaps we can say, “Trust, No Worries, Do What is Yours to Do.”

The challenges of the Sermon

These words are directed to the believers – believers who may well be anxious about trying to live the demands of the Sermon on the Mount. For ages the Church has struggled with these passages in discerning what it means to be faithful disciples in an increasingly materialistic world. As the General Minister of the OFM, Giacomo Benni (1998-2004) once remarked, the friars must be men who live their lives of poverty, chastity and obedience in the world in a manner that is relevant to others, and not simply a passing curiosity. The disciples of every age face the same dilemma in balancing trust and using the talents/gifts God gave us. Even in our age when our trust is hesitant and needs reassurance these verses are reminders that God provides.

Notes

Matthew 6:24 serve: The word translated “serve” is not the usual word for serve (*diakoneo*), but *douleúō* which means to “be a slave.” The word always connotes compulsory service and dependence upon the master/lord. The grammar here is the continuous present implying that one might be able to serve two masters for a short stint, but in the long run, it will not work. **masters:** *kyrios* which also is translated as “Lord.” **hate...love...devoted...despise:** The use of the polar opposites “hate” and “love” reflects a Semitic idiom that should not be pressed unduly (cf. Luke 14:26). The sense is not active dislike but rather a displacement by a higher loyalty. Here the rival is *mammon*. **mammon:** Aramaic *māmōnā*, which means essentially ‘possessions’. While it sometimes carried the connotation of wealth wrongly acquired, this is usually indicated in the Targums by the addition of *dišēqar* (‘of falsehood’; cf. Luke 16:9, 11). *Māmōnā* alone is more neutral, as in the Targum to Proverbs 3:9, ‘Honor God with your mammon’ or even the Palestinian Targums to Deuteronomy 6:5, ‘You shall love Yahweh your God with ... all your mammon’. The same neutral connotation is found in the Mishnah. The rival loyalty then is not that of ill-gotten gains, but of material possessions however legitimate. They can be

used to serve God, but they can also themselves claim a man's allegiance. *Mammon* thus here represents the principle of materialism, and this is in direct conflict with loyalty to God.

Matthew 6:25 anxiety: *merimnaō* ('to be anxious') refers to a state of mind. The range of the use of the word is similar to the span in the English word "care:" (a) "to care for someone or something," (b) "to be concerned or anxious," (c) "to be intent on or strive after," (d) "to be anxiously expectant," (e) "to be solicitous," and (f) "to brood, speculate, or inquire." [TDNT]

Matthew 6:26 birds in the sky: Some other Jewish teachers also recognized that God provides for creatures (Ps 104:24-27) and that people are worth much more than birds (*m. Qiddusin* 4:14). For similar lessons from nature see Job 12:7-10; Prov 6:6-11; Jer 8:7. **do not sow or reap, they gather nothing:** This is not a charter for laziness. The argument is *a fortiori*: if God provides for you, how much more for you. That humans are more important echoes the pattern of Genesis' creation narrative where in humans constitute the final and climatic act of creation and are given authority over the other animals, even their naming. **yet your heavenly Father feeds them:** this should be understood as "provides." As Martin Luther wrote, God provides for the birds, he does not drop food into their beaks.

Matthew 6:27 add a single moment to your life-span: The Greek *hēlikía* means "age" or "stature" but in context is well translated as life span. The "moment" (*pēchys*, literally, a measurement from the tip of the elbow to the tip of the middle finger) was considered a small measure. The point being worry cannot extend life beyond the allotted time. Some suggest that since *hēlikía* can mean "stature" and that *pēchys* is actually a measurement of length that Jesus is referring to height. Doubtful given the context.

Matthew 6:30 thrown into the oven tomorrow: wild flowers provided a regular fuel for the *klibanos*, a domestic oven for cooking food. **of little faith:** except for the parallel in Luke 12:28, the word translated of little faith (*oligopistoi*) is found in the New Testament only in Matthew. It is used by him of those who are disciples of Jesus but whose faith in him is not as deep as it should be (see Matthew 8:26; 14:31; 16:8 and the cognate noun in Matthew 17:20).

Matthew 6:32 pagans: the word is *ethnos* which means nations or the gentiles. The translation of pagan (from the Latin *paganus* meaning people of the country side, as in, not city dwellers) is somewhat anachronistic from an later age of Christianity.

Matthew 6:33 seek: the verb seek (*zētēō*) echoes the compound verb *epizētēō* which was used for the Gentile's anxious quest for material provisions in v.32.

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