

WEEK 9
10.30.16

SEEK FIRST THE KINGDOM



FOCUS VERSE

Matthew 6:33

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

LESSON TEXT

Matthew 6:19–34

19 Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal:

20 But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal:

21 For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

22 The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light.

23 But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!

24 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.

25 Therefore 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?

26 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?

27 Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature?

28 And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin:

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?

31 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.

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

34 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.



FOCUS THOUGHT

Jesus promises us a blessed life if we put Him first.



CULTURE CONNECTION

There's an App for That

Managing our money is a worthwhile goal, but it can feel like hefting an out-of-shape, overfed hippo up Mount Everest. If there is always more month than money, you may need a little help making the money last longer than the month. Mint is an app from Intuit that will help you heft that hippo.

Apps like Mint allow you to see your personal finance accounts in one place: checking, savings, credit cards, 401k. From there you can see where you are spending and when you are saving. And taking a long, hard look at spending and saving can help you break free of anxiety, greed, or both.

Jesus taught us we cannot serve two masters. We clearly want to serve the Lord, but often we find ourselves serving money because we need more of it to live—or so we think. We would all be surprised how quickly a \$10 pizza and a \$5 latte add up to a lifetime of debt. Using an app like Mint helps create a budget and stay accountable to that budget.

So if you need a little help, there's an app for that. Download Mint and start breaking free from money's greedy grip. You and the ones you love will be glad you did.

OUTLINE

I. OLD COVENANT TRADITIONS

- A. Investing in Earthly Treasures
- B. Serving Two Masters—God and Money

II. IDENTIFYING THE HUMAN BONDAGES

- A. Greed
- B. Anxiety

III. THE TRANSFORMING INITIATIVES

- A. Invest Your Treasures in God's Kingdom
- B. Seek First God's Kingdom and His Righteousness

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

One Sunday night, a family motored off to church as they had done hundreds of times before. And they came home from church as they had done hundreds of times before. But on that Sunday night, everything changed.

When they walked into the house, they discovered it had been broken into and ransacked. Every drawer had been pulled open and left that way. Dishes were everywhere. Furniture was moved. Picture frames lay

shattered on the floor. Decorations were destroyed. Whoever had been in their home was looking for something valuable.

When the family took inventory, they realized all their electronic devices were gone. If it had a cord attached, it was gone. They could have wrapped speaker wire around their beagle, and the thieves would have taken her. Although they lived by themselves and to themselves behind locked windows and doors out in the country, thieves still found a way to unload the house and load up their truck.

As long as there is treasure, there will be thieves. A person could buy or build a state-of-the-art vault, and someone somewhere could figure out a way to crack the code. Jesus knew this, so He admonished us in Matthew 6 to lay up our treasures in Heaven, not just on Earth.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. OLD COVENANT TRADITIONS

A. Investing in Earthly Treasures

"Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth

corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matthew 6:19–21).

In the Old Testament, God met with Moses on Mount Sinai and gave him ten profound commandments to keep our relationship with God and others right.

The tenth commandment forbade coveting: “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey; nor anything that is your neighbor’s” (Exodus 20:17, NKJV).

When we live to make money, money is our master; when we make money to live, money is our servant.

Though nearly thirty-five hundred years have come and gone and we have upgraded from horseback to horsepower, human nature has not changed. We are still drawn to want things that are not ours. We are still tempted to covet. If this commandment were written today, it might include “your neighbor’s car, house, phone, job, bank account, clothes,” and so forth. That list could easily be longer than the begats of I Chronicles.

Obviously we have to live, but we should not live to make money; we should make money to live. And there is a Milky Way–size difference between those two statements. When we live to make money, money is our master; when we make money to live, money is our servant. Money is a cruel taskmaster. It is fairly easy to spot individuals who are serving money. They work many more hours than required; they always ask for overtime; they miss church on Sundays to get more done;

they buy nicer, newer toys with longer, larger payments; but no matter how much they accumulate, it will never be enough.

Jesus knows that, and He knows us. So He issued this bold warning: “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” (Matthew 6:24).

B. Serving Two Masters— God and Money

Mammon is an old English term for *money*. Notice that Jesus did not say, “You cannot serve God and ol’ Sluefoot.” When we think of the one on the opposite side of the field from God, we often think of the devil. But Jesus did not contrast Himself with the devil, perhaps because the devil does not even belong in the same hemisphere as God, much less on the same playing field. But Jesus did acknowledge money to be a formidable foe when it comes to our relationship with Him.

He knows if we are caught up in just making more money, we may skip our devotional time in order to get to the job earlier. We may work longer hours and skip church. The job may require traveling on business trips to meet contacts who will help us climb a ladder that, sadly, leans against the wrong building. Jesus knows the heartbreak that comes at the end of a life lived solely in pursuit of more money.

He has stood patiently by many a bedside and listened to a regretful father and husband lament his decision to make the office more home than his own home. And He has heard the regretful prayers of a man who used to walk with Him, but can no longer walk, and who wonders what his life would have been if only he had put God first.

What is the allure of wealth? Why are we drawn to it like a cat to catnip? There are two chains that bind us when it comes to money: greed and anxiety.

II. IDENTIFYING THE HUMAN BONDAGES

A. Greed

Greed is the more famous of the two. Greed has many aliases—covetousness, avarice,

and lust, for example—but greed by any other name is still sin and has no place in the heart of a child of God. Greed claimed scores of trophies in the Word of God alone. Greed persuaded Eve to eat forbidden fruit. Greed overcame Lot and caused him to set up camp toward Sodom. Greed wrapped Jacob’s arms and neck in goatskin sleeves and neck scarf and robbed Esau of his blessing. And those examples were recorded within just the first twenty-nine chapters of Genesis.

In the New Testament, Jesus told a story of a farmer who had a bumper crop to end all bumper crops. He harvested more than he had square feet to store it. After thinking about his dilemma, he came up with a brilliant plan. He would tear down his smaller barns and build a bigger one. He had been blessed to be a blessing to others, but greed convinced him it was better to hoard than to share. That very night, while he dreamed of all he would do with all he would get, he lost his life and his soul.

Greed is short-sighted and self-centered. It does not care for others. Greed climbs ladders and steps on whoever is in the way in order to make it to the next rung. Greed is sly. Sometimes it persuades us that we are blessing our families by working more to give them more things, but we are really robbing our families by stealing the one thing they truly want and need: more time with us. Once greed sinks its claws into our hearts, it does not let go easily.

But greed does not have to win. There is another contender in this fight: contentment. Contentment can stand toe to toe with the greediest greed and will not back down, because contentment is a gift from God. Contentment teaches us we do not always have to have nicer, newer, bigger, faster. We can be content with what we have, and according to the Scripture, “Godliness with contentment is great gain” (1 Timothy 6:6). We already have more when we are grateful for what we already have.

B. Anxiety

When greed cannot trip us up, anxiety will take its best shot. Anxiety seems to be more subtle and less sinful. Anxiety convinces us we need more because there is coming a day

when we will have less. We do not stock up just because we want more; we stock up because we think we will need more. Anxiety also answers to worry, fretfulness, and fearfulness.

*Anxiety becomes sin
when we seek first to
take care of ourselves
and forget to bless the
kingdom of God.*

But Jesus has a prescription for anxiety just as He does for greed: trust. When we are so anxious about our finances and our needs, we are not trusting God. If one were to ask fathers of daughters about their biggest financial fear, many of them would say they are worried about paying for their daughter’s wedding. If they are already living from paycheck to paycheck, where will they come up with the money to pay for the flowers, the caterer, the hall, the dress, the décor, the limo, and the reception?

Anxiety comes naturally, but it becomes sin when we seek first to take care of ourselves and forget to bless the kingdom of God. During a recent general conference, everyone in attendance witnessed a miraculous spirit of generosity and giving during the Global Missions and North American Missions services. To support missions work, people gave vehicles, rental homes, profits from businesses, money for college—all to bless the kingdom of God. There was a true understanding that God would take care of those who care for His kingdom.

It was the same understanding Jesus spoke of when He said, “Therefore I say to you, do not worry 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?” (Matthew 6:25, NKJV).

Time for a short disclaimer: nowhere in Scripture does God suggest that we stop working and stop being good stewards so

we can swing in a hammock and sip lemonade, trusting He will pay our bills and meet our needs. The Book of Proverbs contains a number of verses regarding a slothful person; for example, “The desire of the slothful killeth him; for his hands refuse to labour” (Proverbs 21:25).

Paul admonished the Thessalonians to work: “For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat. . . . we command and exhort by our Lord Jesus Christ, that with quietness they work, and eat their own bread” (II Thessalonians 3:10–12). God expects us to work, but He wants us to guard against anxiety and worry.

In the last few verses of Matthew 6, Jesus presented several illustrations to encourage His listeners not to be anxious. In Matthew 6:25, He reminded them life is much more than what we eat and what we wear. In fact, He is the One who breathed life into us, and He is the One who created our bodies, fearfully and wonderfully made. Since He gave us breath and life, certainly He is able to give us bread and clothes.

Anxiety cannot add one minute to the end of our days. But anxiety and worry can steal years from our lives.

In the second illustration, Jesus reminded the people that the birds of the air fill each morning with a melody, and none of them chew their talons off worrying where they will find their next worm. God takes note of them, all of them, even that little bird that perches its cheery self right outside our window and serenades us at 6:00 AM. Each day, God serves a new helping of breakfast, lunch, and dinner for the birds. Sometimes He uses our bird feeders and our generosity; sometimes He

uses the rain to bring the worms out of hiding. But all the time, God provides.

“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?” (Matthew 6:26).

In a later passage, Matthew wrote, “Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows” (Matthew 10:29–31). Jesus did not die for a sparrow, but He did die for us. And if He knows where the sparrows are and how to care for them, surely He knows where we are and how to care for us.

The third illustration is the length of their days. “Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature?” (Matthew 6:27, NKJV). We may think this verse means adding a cubit to one’s height. A cubit is often defined as the distance from the elbow to the tip of the middle finger—around eighteen inches. Many people would add eighteen inches to their height if they could, but many commentators believe the word *stature* could better be translated “age.” Jesus was asking if worry could lengthen their lives. Anxiety cannot add one minute to the end of our days. But anxiety and worry can steal years from our lives.

The final illustration comes from the ground. Just look at the lilies. They do not work twelve-hour days or spend their lives spinning thread into dresses and suits. Yet their beauty is breathtaking. In fact, not even the richest king in Israel’s history was dressed as fine. But as quickly as the flowers spring up in the spring, they fade in the fall and their beauty is gone. If God clothes them and cares for them, how much more will He clothe us and care for us?

“Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: and yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these” (Matthew 6:28–29).

In each of those illustrations, Jesus could have referred to Himself as Jehovah-jireh, the Provider or El Shaddai, the Almighty. But He referred to Himself in a more tender way. He is our Father who truly cares for us as a good dad cares for his children.

Like the consummate teacher He was, Jesus summarized His teaching on this subject: “Therefore, do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things” (Matthew 6:31–32, NKJV).

III. THE TRANSFORMING INITIATIVES

A. Invest Your Treasures in God’s Kingdom

The message of Matthew 6:25–32 is clear: do not be greedy and do not worry. In verse 33, Jesus told us what to do: “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.” In one short sentence, Jesus prescribed the cure to end greed and anxiety. We simply need to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.

What does that statement mean? It means we seek to promote the kingdom of God in this fallen world before we seek to promote ourselves. We invest our treasures, our time, and our talents in the kingdom of God.

“Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the LORD of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it” (Malachi 3:10).

When we invest our treasures in the kingdom of God, He has promised to bless us in return. However, our motive for giving tithes and offerings should not be to receive blessings, but to be a blessing to the Kingdom.

The Lord has gifted every believer with a talent or skill. God gifted some to preach or teach. Others have musical talents such as singing, playing instruments, or leading

choirs and congregations in worship. Still others have gifts of administration or the ability to work with their hands.

God has gifted some individuals to work with children or with teens. God-called missionaries fly to foreign fields and work with people who have never heard the precious name of Jesus. Some people have the talent to present truth through skits and drama. Others may be gifted to run a soundboard. Computer users may love to design websites. People skilled in auto mechanics may enjoy working on church vans.

Whatever gifts God has given us, whatever He has given us a passion to do, there is a way to invest that talent and treasure in the kingdom of God to promote His kingdom in this world.

The message of Matthew 6:25–32 is clear: do not be greedy and do not worry.

B. Seek First God’s Kingdom and His Righteousness

God may be asking the jet-setting businessman to seek His kingdom first, while strapped in with seatbelt securely fastened, by sharing his testimony with the man or woman sitting next to him. God may be asking the hardworking, full-time housewife to seek His kingdom first by inviting her hardworking single-mom neighbor and her children for a meal. Besides demonstrating the love of God, the meal would be an opportunity to witness and let the neighbor know there is hope. Starry-eyed college graduates looking for a place to land should also be looking for ways to use their talents and training to bless the kingdom of God. Maybe they could help a North American Missions pastor set up an audio/video system. Or perhaps they could design postcards for the church or fix church vans.

Seeking the kingdom of God first wakes us up each morning asking where we can be a blessing today. It peeks inside our wallets to see where we invest our finances. That is one reason we give God the first of our income as a tithe. Tithing is a gentle reminder that God has given us what we have, and we are giving 10 percent of it back to Him to bless His kingdom.

When global missionaries come through our churches and share their vision and passion for their fields of labor, seeking the kingdom of God first sometimes means we give up our dream of a newer boat so we can give that money to help send them to the people who love and need them.

Seeking the kingdom of God first asks God what calling, college, or career God has in mind for our children. When the children become old enough, parents should encourage them to seek God for His direction as well. If extra-curricular school activities clash with church services and youth rallies, seeking the kingdom of God first values making it to Heaven above everything else.

Seeking the kingdom of God first values the quiet call of God above the boisterous call of this world. We know the schools with good placements and degrees that are honored the world over, but what about God? When our children go to youth camp and come home changed and called, will we be willing to give up our dreams of an easy life for them so they can follow God's call? Seeking the kingdom of God first is not always easy, but it is always right.

We must seek God's righteousness. One line from a popular chorus that used to be sung at altar calls said, "Above all else, I must be saved." More important than being rich or famous or powerful or comfortable, we must

be right with God. At the end of life, none of those things will matter. But if we are right with God, we will spend eternity looking into the face of the One who died for us so we could live for Him. If we are not right with God, we will spend eternity hiding our faces from the one who sold us a lie and cost us our souls.

Jesus promised that if we seek His kingdom and His righteousness first, He would provide all the things we need, because He is our Father.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

Today is a good day to take inventory. Not of the shop shelves or of the savings account, but of the heart. What do we put first in life? Why? When we wake in the morning, do we check the stock market first, or do we read the Scriptures first? Are we consumed with greed and the need to have more just to have more? Are we overcome with anxiety and the need to have more because we are afraid we will have less in the future?

It is time to leave greed and anxiety where they belong: at the feet of Jesus. It is time to ask God to forgive us for being greedy and anxious, and to ask for help to trust Him to take care of our needs. It is time to turn our eyes on Jesus and not to be covetous and envious of the new toys and technology our neighbors bring home. It is time to remember we are not living for this life alone, and we should treat this life more like a hotel and less like a home.

If we will seek God and His righteousness first, He will take care of all the things we need because He is our Father. He knows what we need, He is able to meet our needs, and He wants to meet our needs. We just need to trust Him. ■

REFLECTIONS

- Today's lesson teaches us against greed and anxiety. Which do you struggle with most?
- What are the symptoms of greed and anxiety?
- What are the prescriptions for greed and anxiety? How often are we supposed to take these remedies?
- Discuss Jesus' value of the kingdom of God and His righteousness above seeking to meet our own needs.