

Sunday, June 9, 2019

This sermon is the 7th in a series of sermons I've been doing on the "Sermon on the Mount" found in Matthew 5-7. I've been using the following as a high-level summary:

1. Our essential characteristics (what we are) – vv. 5:3-12
2. Our function in the world – vv. 5:13-16
3. Our relationship to the law – vv. 5:17-48
4. Our religious life – vv. 6:1-18
- 5. Our mundane life – vv. 6:19-34**
6. Our relationship to other people – vv. 7:1-12
7. Being doers and not hearers only – vv. 7:13-27

Previously, I've said that one of the linchpin messages of the Sermon is that in order to enter the kingdom of heaven, your righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees (Matthew 5:20). Your heart must be right (the beatitudes), your function in the world must be right (salt and light), your view of the Word of God and His law must be right, your religious activities must be right, and now we are talking about how our mundane life must be right. When I say "mundane," I'm referring to our common day-to-day lives on this earth, and the worldliness that each of us is prone to indulge in.

This section of the Sermon on the Mount, running from Matthew 6:19-34, can be broken up into two parts. The first part is Matthew 6:19-24 and addresses the danger of loving the world. The second is Matthew 6:25-34, which focuses on anxious care and worry. Both sections address the perils of worldliness from different angles. If Satan can't get you with one, he'll get you with the other, but more often than not, he'll get you with both. Really, he's not so concerned with which particular sin he can get you involved in as long as you're sinning.

Beginning with the first section:

"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. The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. 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! 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 6:19-24)

To lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth means primarily to put your trust, time and effort into your money and other worldly possessions and endeavors. Throughout history, peoples' wealth could be measured in multiple ways, and Christ is referring to three of the main ways here: clothing, grain, and gold. The moth refers to your garments being destroyed by moths (these tiny creatures get into your wardrobe and feed off of your garments, laying eggs by the hundreds until there is an infestation). The word translated "rust" actually refers to eating food. The idea is that food (like grain) has been stored up, and some rodent or other creature comes in and destroys it. It could also refer to any corrosion or consumption of your resources. One commentator refers to it as "wear and tear." And thieves obviously refers to a thief breaking into your house and stealing your money or other valuables.

I think we can all understand how wealth can be measured by the amount of gold a person has, but we might think that it's strange that clothing and grain would be considered to be so valuable – if we need clothes and food nowadays, we run to the store where they are available in abundance. But you can all probably remember a story or two out of the Old Testament where someone gives a gift of gold or silver, but also includes a few changes of garments. Clothing was of great value. For example, when Naaman wanted to be cured of his leprosy, the king of Syria sent "ten talents of silver, and six thousand pieces of gold, and ten changes of raiment" with him to the king of Israel (see 2 Kings 5). Grain is also very valuable – especially in times of famine. You can't eat gold or other possessions. "We have mortgaged our lands, vineyards, and houses, that we might buy corn, because of the dearth." (Nehemiah 5:3).

What Christ is talking about here is hoarding or stockpiling. People often stockpile because they don't trust God. They want to have a backup plan in case God isn't able to take care of them. They want to sit back and relax and think that they have everything under control. Or they do it out of greed. They'd rather store up more than they could ever possibly use, rather than help a person with an immediate need. In either case, they aren't using the resources they have to serve God. The rich fool in Luke 12 is the perfect example:

"And he said unto them, Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth. And he spake a parable unto them, saying, The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully: And he thought within himself, saying, What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits? And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, [and] be merry. But God said unto him, [Thou] fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided? So [is] he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."
(Luke 12:15-21)

[Note that while I'm primarily addressing material goods, we don't have to necessarily limit it to that. A lot of this can also be applied to non-material things like your time, skills, talents, etc.]

Christ here doesn't just tell us what not to do – He also tells us what to do, and the solution is to “lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven.” This simply means to spend your time and resources on serving the King. Remember that we're pilgrims and sojourners here on earth, and that we are stewards of the things that God has entrusted to us. They are on loan, as it were. So we can either squander those things that belong to God, or we can use them properly to serve Him and advance His kingdom – we have to be careful about how we use the things God has given us. If you look at a man's life, and the general bent of how he spends his resources, it will show you where his heart is.

For many people, though, their resources have become the main show, and it's a game of how much we can accumulate for our own pleasure. One of Christ's messages here is to tell us how stupid we are if we put our trust and affection in the things of this world. They will all perish. They will all melt with fervent heat. And in fact, they are all degrading, and perishing, and decaying before our very eyes. As the hymn says, “Change and decay in all around I see – O thou who changest not, abide with me.” But our inheritance in heaven is incorruptible, undefiled, and fadeth not away (1 Peter 1:4). This is not a small matter. Worldliness is an attitude and it can quickly pervade our lives. It has an unbelievably strong death grip on our hearts and minds. If you don't recognize that, you're in trouble. It's also deceitful – we often will define “worldliness” in such a way that we are not guilty of it ourselves. The fact is, we will all lay treasure up – the only question is, are we laying it up on earth, or in heaven?

Now, I don't believe that Christ is telling us that we can't possess material goods. Some people have perverted this scripture to mean that we can't own anything, or, they say, we're laying up treasures on earth. But an interpretation like that makes much of the rest of scripture unintelligible. For example, a prohibition like “thou shalt not steal” is meaningless if God doesn't really want us to own anything anyway. If you are stealing something, it implies that the person you're stealing from owned the thing you stole, and had a right to possess it. The book of Proverbs is full of wisdom on handling your goods. A man who doesn't provide for his own house has denied the faith and is worse than an infidel (1 Timothy 5:8). No, He's not talking about merely owning material goods – He's talking about our attitudes towards those goods. Remember that it's not money that is the root of all evil – it is the love of money that is the root of all evil (1 Timothy 6:10). Are we putting our trust in worldly things? Are these the things that our lives are about? Do these things consume our time and thoughts, while our service to God languishes? If so, get rid of or repurpose them. An important question to ask yourself is “what is my true motivation behind this thing?” A lot of people will

do whatever they want to do to fulfill their own desires, and then retroactively say, “I did that for the glory of God.” But be honest – what is your real motivation? Where is your heart?

Please understand that on a topic like this, a person can quickly descend into “righteous over much” (Ecclesiastes 7:16) mode and look at their brethren through hypocritical, censorious eyes. Understand that there are a lot of things in this life that are indifferent – they are neither good nor bad in and of themselves. But how you interact with and relate to those things can be sinful, if it causes you to be a bad steward with the resources that God has given you. So I’m asking each person here to examine themselves and make sure that worldliness is not at the heart of your life, and motivation, and thoughts.

Our Lord goes on to use the metaphor of the “eye.” It is through our physical eyes that light enters the body, and the other members of the body are able to function properly by that light. If our eyes are in good working order, we can focus on something that is illuminated by light, and the body can take action. If our eyes are damaged, we’re left in darkness, and are reduced to groping around. To have a single eye means that you can see things as they really are – your eye is sound and healthy and can fulfill its purpose. He’s taking that physical reality and applying it spiritually – it refers to the eye of our mind, our heart, our spirit. If those are corrupt and stingy, we won’t see things clearly. Our spiritual vision is clouded by our worldliness and desire to greedily serve ourselves rather than God, and we grope around in spiritual darkness. This is the natural state of mankind, and by nature, we love this:

“And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.” (John 3:19)

He ends this section with the metaphor of servitude. A slave can only have one master. This word translated “master” means “a possessor, disposer, owner, one who has control, ruler, chief, sovereign, prince” (in fact, most of the places in the New Testament where this word is used, it is referring to the Lord God). From the viewpoint of the disposition of your heart, either God is your master or the world is your master; you either serve God, or you serve the world; you either love God, or you love the world. It can’t be both ways – you can’t have one foot in the one, and one foot in the other – you can’t straddle the fence. And for those people who try, there will be only one of two outcomes for you. If your allegiance is to God, you will lay up treasure in heaven, live in light, and ultimately overcome the world through your God-given faith. If your allegiance is to the world, you will lay up treasure on earth, live in darkness, and, like Demas, ultimately forsake God (2 Timothy 4:10).

This word we see here, “mammon,” is the personification of riches, wealth, avarice, treasure, or anything that you put your trust in as opposed to God. It is a great sin and insult to God to

serve mammon instead of Him. God requires absolute devotion – nothing less than that is acceptable. To our own shame, we are all guilty here. We are prone to spend most of our time thinking of earthly things, and giving very little thought to eternity. We tend to covet the things of the earth and forget the fact that we are joint-heirs with Christ! Sin deceives us into believing that we can have treasure here on earth. So thank God that “if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.” (1 John 2:1).

“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? 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? Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature? And why take ye thought for raiment? 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. 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? Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. 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.” (Matthew 6:25-34)

This section is about anxious worry. Christ tells us repeatedly here to “take no thought.” We have to be careful here that we understand what He’s saying, because sometimes our modern usage of a word or phrase is different than what we might see in the King James translation of the Bible (for example, the word “conversation”). That phrase “take no thought” does not mean that we can’t ever think about the thing. The underlying Greek word means “to be anxious, to be troubled with cares.” And the various underlying nuances in the Greek cover the whole gamut – He’s telling us “if you’re spending your time worrying about things, stop it...and if you’re not spending your time worrying about things, don’t start.” And this is not just friendly advice to “take no thought” – this is a command from the King of kings.

If you’ll notice, this part of the passage begins with the word “therefore.” That points back to the language that came just before. He’s basically saying “laying up treasure on earth is a great sin. It causes you to walk in gross darkness, and to hate and despise God. Therefore, don’t worry about those worldly things. Instead, your primary concern should be seeking the kingdom and righteousness of God, and you will have everything you need.”

I think it would be accurate to say that we all worry about things. For some of us, it's a preoccupation. If we don't have something right in front of us to worry about, then we manufacture things to worry about. But, beloved, this is a terrible sin. When we anxiously fret about things, it means that we distrust God and His promises. We are saying that God is unfaithful; that He's a liar; that He lacks power. You're saying, "God, I know you said this, but I just can't trust you – I need a plan B."

The examples that Christ gives here are about the basics of life itself – food, drink, clothing. There are a lot of people in the world today who may not know where their next meal is coming from – but by God's providence, most of us here don't have that particular problem. But we may worry further into the future – what happens when I get old? How will I survive? What if I get fired? Where will my food come from? What if there's a time where my life is in danger? This is a great sin to worry about such things.

Our lives are more than food and drink, and our bodies are more than raiment. Christ is reasoning with us here. He's showing us how unreasonable we are if we worry and fret. The argument He uses here is an argument from the greater to the lesser – God gave us life, and if He's able to give life, He's certainly able to sustain life. The Deist view of God is often compared to a watchmaker. They say that He created the universe, created all the laws of the universe, set things in motion, and then walked away. Similar to a watchmaker who makes a watch, winds it up, and then walks away to let it run on its own. This is not our God; this is not the God of the Bible. He is the Sustainer as well as the Creator. Remember where your life came from - not a soul has been born in this world that God didn't will to give life to, and not a soul continues to live without Him, "for in him we live, and move, and have our being." (Acts 17:28).

He goes on to reason further with us with the opposite type of argument, from the lesser to the greater. If He takes care of a relatively insignificant creature like a bird, then wouldn't it stand to reason that He would take care of you, who are better than a bird? If all the worry you can muster can't produce a small thing like adding a cubit to your stature, why are you taking so much thought about these other things? If God clothes the grass of the field, how much more will He clothe you?

He says, "Behold the fowls of the air." Open your eyes! Stop inspecting your navel and look at your surroundings every once in a while! It doesn't take a genius to understand that if you see birds flying around, then those birds, in fact, have had food provided to them. Otherwise, you wouldn't be seeing any birds flying around. And who feeds them? Our heavenly Father. Note that it is our heavenly Father – it is not the bird's heavenly Father. No bird ever had a Redeemer shed His blood for its soul. No bird was ever made in the image of God. No bird

will ever be a joint-heir with Christ. No bird ever had a place prepared for him in heaven. No bird ever had a crown of righteousness laid up for him. And yet God, in His providence, cares even for these creatures. Every time you see a bird, it should remind you of the gracious providence of God. God told Job: “Who provideth for the raven his food? when his young ones cry unto God, they wander for lack of meat.” (Job 38:41). Psalm 147:9 – “He giveth to the beast his food, *and* to the young ravens which cry.” When the raven is hungry, it cries to God, and God provides food. Is anything more perverse than the idea of a father providing for an animal while he lets his own children starve? How much more will God provide for us?

Now, some have interpreted this particular verse to mean that we get to be lazy and idle. If the birds don't sow or reap or gather into barns, and they're fed by God, then we shouldn't have to sow or reap or gather into barns - we can just hang out and wait for God to drop food into our mouths. That's obviously not the point of what Christ is saying, and it goes against the rest of the scripture. It's part of the curse of mankind that we must work for our food, and we try to do an end-run around that at our own peril (see Genesis 3:17-19). “If any would not work, neither should he eat.” (2 Thessalonians 3:10). But we've all seen birds out in the wild – they don't sit by and idly wait for food. They search for it. They have a built-in, God-given instinct to work to find their food. The point Christ is making is that the bird doesn't fret – it doesn't anxiously worry about the future. It doesn't build storehouses to stockpile excessively, out of fear that its needs won't be met in the future. It knows that food will be provided.

In preparing for this sermon, I learned that some birds keep caches of seeds around, so they'll have something to eat in the winter, and if they end up not needing them, they just leave them behind and move on with life. Other birds don't store food at all. We might be able to learn something there, because this area of the scripture, like many areas of scripture, is often misused. People, for example, may say that it's a sin for a person to have a savings account, and that every penny that comes in needs to be immediately used for this or that. Sometimes we have to live hand to mouth, and sometimes we don't. I think that looking at the whole Bible, the big picture here is that wise planning with the resources that we have is good to do (see Proverbs 21:20, Proverbs 6:6-8, and Luke 14:28-30 as examples), while making plans because of disbelief and skeptical worry is a great sin against God. Remember, the context of our passage today is about being anxious and fretful. To use the language in the passage, He's not saying that it's a sin to merely sow, reap, and gather into barns. He's saying that it's a sin to sow if you then sit around and worry about whether or not it will produce. He's saying it's a sin to reap and gather into barns if you are stockpiling and trying to hedge your bets because you don't really believe that God is able to take care of you in the future.

Moving on: “Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature?” This has always seemed strange to me, because I don't spend a lot of time fretting about growing a

foot and a half taller. There are some people, though, where this is a big deal. Height (or lack thereof) can cause some people to feel insecure (we've all heard of the Napoleon complex). Interestingly, studies show that taller people are more likely to command respect in leadership positions (for example, all but 6 US presidents have been at or above average height) and on average, they make more money. A search on google for how to grow taller will yield millions of results – there are exercises, pills, different fashion styles, lifts for your shoes, etc. So this is something that some diminutive people do worry about.

But another way that the word “stature” could be translated is “age.” In fact, the first definition of the Greek word is “age, time of life, length of life.” We see it translated that way in John 9 when the parents of the blind man who had received sight said, “he is of age; ask him,” and in Hebrews 11 when it says that Sara “was delivered of a child when she was past age.” And it is not unprecedented in scripture to use a physical length to refer to number of days. For example, Psalm 39:5 says, “Thou hast made my days as an handbreadth.” My opinion on this is that in the context, it makes more sense to read this as Christ talking about length of life rather than height. The context, remember, is not taking thought for your life. You can't add one more unit of time to your life. You can't add one more step to your walk. I'm not saying you shouldn't take care of your health and maintain your bodies – you should be doing that, because it helps you live day to day in a lot of ways, most importantly in service to your King. But you shouldn't be doing things out of worry and because you're living under some delusion that you're going to add time to your life. Whatever the case - whether it's height or length of life - the message is the same: all the effort that you spend worrying about stuff like that is futile, because your anxiety about it isn't going to change it by one iota. And if you can't change even a small thing like that by worrying about it, why would you be so foolish to worry about whether or not God is able to sustain you day by day?

Christ then moves on to another example – the lilies of the field. Before, He told us to “behold” (or, “look at”) the birds. Now He tells us to “consider” the lilies. This is a stronger word than “behold.” It means to “learn thoroughly, examine carefully.” Look carefully at how amazing they are. Examine their beauty. Meditate on their glory. The grass of the field didn't have to lift a finger, and yet God lavishes beauty on it. The finest raiment on earth can't be compared to a simple flower for beauty. But the flower, and the grass that it adorns, is transient. It's here today and gone tomorrow. In the ancient world, dried grass was often used as fuel – they would cut it down and use it to burn in their ovens. On the contrary, our souls will go on for eternity. If God is going to clothe something so temporary, won't He clothe His precious sons and daughters who will dwell with Him for eternity?

We find here the first time in the scripture that Jesus uses the phrase, “O ye of little faith.” Every time He uses it, He's talking to His disciples. Note that He does not say, “O ye of no

faith.” He is rebuking them for their inadequate faith. Faith is there - it’s just deficient. Often times, we have saving faith – we believe that God is able to save us, we believe He is able to forgive our sins, we believe He is preparing a place in heaven for us...we just distrust that He’s able to maintain us along the way. We are lacking in faith in the day-to-day providence of God. Just remember, He is the sovereign God over every aspect of our lives, from the food He provided to us for breakfast this morning, to saving our eternal souls. It’s not becoming for us to have little faith. Little faith means that we don’t take the scripture at face value. It means that we don’t fully believe His promises. It means we don’t practically apply the doctrines that we claim to believe. It means we have inadequate faith in what God says about Himself – He is faithful, He is good, He is just, He is sovereign, He is immutable, and He is our Father. Don’t forget who your Father is. Every day, earthly fathers provide for their own children, and the children don’t even question it. They know they’re going to have food to eat; they know they’re going to have clothes to wear. And if an earthly father can provide for his kids, how much more is our heavenly Father able to provide for us? There is no worry or anxiety that doesn’t have little faith as the foundation. He loves us, He’s saved us, and He has all the resources of heaven and eternity at His disposal to make sure that He brings us through our lives to glory. It’s really somewhat of a tragedy that we have such a low view and understanding of His love and care for us. God is worthy of a far greater faith than we give Him. We have no right to worry, and when we do, we broadcast to the round world that we are of little faith, and we dishonor God.

So what is the remedy for all of this? Christ tells us: “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.” “Seek” means to “desire, diligently enquire into, endeavor, strive after, aim for.” The word “first” means “chiefly, principally, first in rank.” Unbelievers (here in the passage called “Gentiles” or sometimes translated “heathen”) don’t know God. They spend their time and efforts seeking after earthly things. If these are the things that we seek, how are we different than the heathen? What things consume your thoughts? What things do you talk about? You might be able to give all the right answers if someone asks you some Bible trivia questions, but what are commonly your topics of conversation? “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh...every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment.” (Matthew 12:34, 36). Do you view everything in your life through the lens of your faith in God? Ask yourself this and be honest. If something happens, is your reaction essentially different than what the reaction of an unbeliever would be? If someone saw you, would they be able to tell any difference between you and a heathen? Don’t seek after what the Gentiles seek after - Christ tells us that our minds instead should be focused on God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness, and He will provide the rest. He knows what we need, and He’ll provide it for us. If you’re going to worry about anything – if you’re going to be preoccupied with anything – let it be your relationship with God. Let it be with His kingdom and righteousness.

And what does this mean to seek after His kingdom and righteousness? A simple answer would be that it means that you are meditating on His word day and night (Psalm 1:2); you are making your calling and election sure (2 Peter 1:10); you are working out your own salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12); you are departing from iniquity (2 Timothy 2:19); you are hearing His sayings and doing them (Matthew 7:24-25); you are growing in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18); you are preaching Christ (1 Corinthians 1:23); you are praying for the Lord Jesus to return (Revelation 22:20); you are making your main goal in life to “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: that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable unto His death; if by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead” (Philippians 3:9-11). And you can’t do any of that without knowing what the Bible says. You have a duty, just like the Bereans did, to search the scriptures daily. It means to examine, scrutinize, investigate, discern, judge, question – it’s not enough to do the absolute minimum and read a little bit so you can check it off of your to-do list and then tell everyone that you read the Bible every day. You have to get in there, study it, examine it, and question it until you get to the bottom of it. “Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee: because he trusteth in thee.” (Isaiah 26:3).

Back to the Sermon on the Mount, Christ ends this section with: “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.” Again, this doesn’t mean you can’t ever think about the future or be prudent and make provisions; otherwise, we’d all quit our jobs. But it does mean you must not have worry and anxious care about those things. People who are prone to worrying generally are not content with addressing the troubles of the present – we will move on to the future and bring back imagined troubles so we can worry about those. And worry is a thief and a liar – it robs from you the present joy that you ought to be having, and it tells you that you can’t trust God. Every day has its own quota of troubles, as it were, so be content to serve God day by day. God promised us, “As thy days, so shall thy strength be.” (Deuteronomy 33:25).

As I’ve mentioned previously, you may be convicted of your utter inability to produce the righteousness that you need to enter the kingdom of God. These standards of righteousness laid out by Christ are too lofty for us. Through the Spirit of God, we can grow in grace and faith, but as long as we are in these frames, we will have the old man to contend with. But my friends, do not despair – we “have found a ransom” (Job 33:24) and are redeemed “with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot.” (1 Peter 1:19).

I love you. Amen.