

First Things First

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Preacher: Andrew Price

[0 : 00] Well, please do keep your Bibles open at that passage, a well-known one, of course. But I thought I'd start with a bit of a multiple-choice quiz, and the question is, what is more important to you?

Is it mains or desserts? What do you go for? Mains. Oh, okay, yeah, me too. I thought it would be desserts. Okay. All right, and here's a very important one that's very controversial at the moment. Do you call the McDonald's potato cakes or potato scallops? Cakes, yeah, yeah, yeah. It's been a big debate. I don't know if you've seen it on social media.

In fact, some people are very passionate about it. If you write potato scallops, they cross it out and put cakes instead. But either way, that's where all the potatoes have gone. If you can't find them in Aldi or Coles, it's McDonald's.

Or more seriously, what's more important to you? Is it family or money or work? Oh, yeah, you don't have to answer. But I'm glad.

[1 : 04] Yeah, go for that one. What about this one? Your kids or grandkids or even your own education or your own health? It's getting a bit trickier now, isn't it? But I wonder what you would say is more important if we add an option C to all those, namely God.

God. Now, my guess is we all know we ought to choose option C, God, oughtn't we? We know that, that God should be most important in our lives first in our lives.

But it's not always easy to do it, is it? There are so many concerns we have in life that can distract us and pull us to make those concerns first rather than keep God first.

And our passage today is in the middle of Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount where he teaches his disciples about what it means to live in God's kingdom. At the beginning of the sermon in chapter 5, he's talking to his disciples, but the whole crowd is listening in on him.

And in our passage today, he says living in God's kingdom means keeping first things first. That is keeping God first in our lives.

[2 : 16] This is a well-known passage. My guess is you've all heard it before. But the trick will be to actually put it into practice, won't it? And so let's work our way through it and be refreshed by it.

And then at the end, I'll give you a chance to do business with God and ask for his help to put it into practice in your lives. Because this is what I want to encourage us to do this year.

We've had so many different concerns thrown at us over the last three years, the two years of lockdowns. Last year was bumpy. You know, people were in and out of lockdown. The rules were kind of gradually going off.

It was quite messy. There's lots of things that take our eyes off God. And so let's reset this year and try and put first things first.

And to help us, Jesus tells us to don't seek treasure on earth but in heaven. So point one in your outlines and verse 19 and 20 in the Bibles.

[3 : 15] Have a look there. He says, Now, does Jesus mean then that we are not allowed to have a savings account?

Is he against having superannuation? Of course not. After all, we are taught elsewhere in the Bible that children should not save up for their parents but parents should save up for their children.

And there's some saving happening. Of course, we're all to care for our relatives in need as well. Or in 1 Corinthians 16, Paul tells the Corinthians to set aside a sum of money each week.

There's a form of saving for giving to the church when he comes around. Proverbs, for example, also tells people who are sluggish in life to look at the ant who stores its provisions.

There's some storing up in summer for winter and so on. In other words, some storing up is part of being good stewards with what God has given us.

[4 : 31] Rather, Jesus is saying don't seek treasure on earth as your priority. Don't make the pursuit of earthly treasure of first importance in your life.

I caught up with a friend last week who I've not seen in about 10 years. I think it's been. So we kind of did what I've been doing in the last 10-year thing. He is a very gifted barrister and he ended up working for a company as their in-house legal advice team.

He was the team, I think. And because he was good, when the company was sold for a lot of money, he got a share, a very big share in the sale.

And he said to me, it made me greedy for more. And so his next job, he pursued another company, a small one, with the aim of building that up and then selling it off for a huge amount of money. You see, here is someone who pursued storing up earthly treasure. It became of first importance to him.

[5 : 37] It drove his decisions. But then he said to me, he said, oh, but that new company, God kindly collapsed and showed me my sin.

And so don't make storing up treasure on earth your priority. After all, verse 19 says that it is destroyed by pests or taken by thieves or collapsed by two years of COVID lockdowns. Instead, verse 20, do store up treasure in heaven, which does last. How are we to store up treasure in heaven? Well, by serving God in whatever way we can, including with our money.

So Paul says to Timothy, he says, tell those who are rich, which in Australia is most of us here compared to the rest of the world, to be rich in good deeds and to be generous and willing to share. In this way, they will lay up treasure in heaven, you see. That's how we store it. And there are so many here, as I tried to point out before, and thank you again for standing up, that do serve God in this church in many ways.

[6 : 48] Whether it's serving here or caring for others or simply praying at home. In fact, I know of one man who walks his dog. He's retired, but he walks his dog every day. And when he walks his dog, he has a set list of people to pray for every day.

It's terrific. All this is how we store up treasure in heaven. And while there are many in our church whose earthly bank accounts are not very big, let me tell you that there are many here whose heavenly bank accounts are bursting at the seams, which is terrific, isn't it?

But the reason Jesus tells us this is because it actually helps us to keep first things first.

Verse 21. He says, Do this, don't store on earth but in heaven. Verse 21. You see, the location of our treasure shows the location of our hearts.

It's where our hearts are going to be. And so if we store treasure in heaven, it will help us to have our hearts in heaven on God. To have the high king of heaven, the first in my heart.

[8 : 02] To, as our first reading put it, to love God with all our heart, all our soul and mind and strength. And so the first way to help us keep first things first this year is by seeking to store treasure in heaven rather than on earth.

And to encourage us, Jesus actually tells us, this is actually for our good. Point 2, verse 22. He says, The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light, which is good for you.

But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If there the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness? Now this saying is a little bit tricky, but I think the idea is our eyes shape our lives.

That is what we set our eyes on will shape how we live our lives, how much light we have to see how to live in this world. And to help you see this, you need to know that the word healthy in verse 22, it can mean a couple of things, but one of them is single focused.

And so Jesus, I think, is saying is if our eyes are single focused on God, you know, treasure in heaven, then it will give us light to live life well in this world, to live his way, which is for our good.

[9 : 27] But verse 23, if our eyes are unhealthy, or the word is literally evil, if we set our eyes on what is evil, then it's only going to lead us into darkness and stumbling, not to live life well in this world.

That is God's way, which is for our good. One of our church members here this morning, and part of our 1030 congregation, is legally blind, and with his permission, his name is Jay.

Hi, Jay. You may have seen Jay around. He often has a cane, and if you do see him, you can say hi, Jay, to him. In fact, let's say hi, Jay. Hi, Jay. But he says that you've got to stand right in front of me if I'm to see you, because he has no peripheral vision out the side.

And when it comes to God, Jesus, I think, is saying, we're to be like Jay. We're to have this single focus dead set on God, and not let our peripheral vision distract us, and make other things more important than him in our lives.

For if our eyes are healthy, single focus on God, it will give us light to live rightly in this world. And so keeping God first is actually for our good.

[10:47] And in fact, having a split focus is bad for us. It doesn't work, actually. Verse 24. Jesus, no one can serve two masters. It just doesn't work.

Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you'll be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and, in this case, money. Just like there was one male Australian Open Winner, one female Australian Open Winner, just like there's one head chef in the kitchen, you can only have one ultimate master in life.

Having more just doesn't work. And if you try, you'll have divided loyalties. As they say, too many cooks spoil the broth, yeah.

It just doesn't work. And so you see, keeping first things first is actually for our good. It gives us light to live right in this world, and it keeps us from feeling divided in life.

Of course, one of the things that drives us to serve something other than God, in this case, money, is our worry.

[11:55] And so, again, to help us keep first things first, Jesus then goes on to say, don't worry, but seek first his kingdom. Point three, verse 25. He says, therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you'll eat or drink, or about your body, what you'll wear, he says.

You see, and then he goes on to say, is not life more than food and the body more than clothes? There are lots of things that can cause us to worry this year.

I mentioned some at the start, the interest rates, the cost of living going up. In fact, I saw a news article yesterday which had shoppers irate because of the cost of Kellogg's cereal going up.

And they said, you know, two boxes on special for \$17. That's a lot of money. That's expensive and that's on special. Another reason to stick to Weet-Bix, isn't it? Then there's the ongoing uncertainty with COVID, which seems like it's here to stay.

Or the uncertainty of religious freedom in our country. I got an email this week where there are more moves to remove religious freedom from our Christian schools. There are lots of things that can cause us to worry this year, aren't there?

[13:13] But Jesus says, don't. And by don't worry, he doesn't mean don't care. We should still care. Rather, he means don't be anxious in an ongoing way.

The word worry is in the present tense. In other words, don't let our concerns consume us with stress such that they become first in our lives rather than God.

Don't let our ongoing anxiety drive us to chase after these things like the pagans do. You see, when things happen, it's normal to be concerned and wonder, oh, what are we going to do now?

That's normal. It's what happens next that's important. That is, do we cast all anxiety on God knowing he cares for us?

Yes, we've still got to do things, but do we cast that worry on him and leave it with him? Or do we let it drive our lives? Do we trust God to provide?

[14:14] Or do we let our concerns consume us with stress? By the way, Jesus is not saying you do nothing. You just kind of give it to God and then, you know, play the Xbox or whatever.

No, no, we still need to do things. He's talking about our worry and our stress, our anxiety. Because Jesus also goes on to say, God will provide.

In the second half of verse 25, he says, is not life more than food and the body more than clothes? In other words, there are more important things in life than just food and clothes.

For teenage girls that I know, it's hard to believe there's anything more important than clothes and shoes. And for teenage boys, I know it's hard to believe there's anything more important than food. I think when Michelle first, Michelle and I were dating and when she first cooked me at that meal, I think it was then I decided, I'm going to marry this girl. Not the right criteria, I know.

[15:16] But Jesus says there are actually more important things than food and clothes. There's our life and our body. Our life is more important than the food that feeds it.

Our bodies are more important than the clothes that clothe it. And so the idea is, if God has given us our life and body, which are more important, will he not give us the less important things to look after it?

Of course he will. After all, he does that for the birds who are less valuable. Verse 26. Look at the birds of the air. They do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.

Are you not much more valuable than they? Of course we are. We're not to be anxious, first, because God will provide for our needs, and second, because worrying won't prolong our lives. Verse 27. Can any of you, by worrying, add a single hour to your life? Here's a very practical reason not to worry.

[16:18] It's not going to extend our lives. In fact, if we're so stressed and our BP goes up, it's not going to extend our lives. It could actually shorten our lives, couldn't it? So we're not to be consumed by our concerns, because it won't prolong our life, and because God will provide for our needs, which is the reason Jesus returns to in verses 28 to 30.

He says, And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow? They do not labor or spin, yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these.

And if that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, you of little faith?

Of course he will. In fact, in the end, at the end of verse 30, to be so consumed with worry, rather than trusting God, is a lack of faith, isn't it?

And so we are to have faith, or trust that God will provide. There used to be that song around, Don't Worry Be Happy. Do you remember that? No? I can't even do that.

[17:29] Anyway, it's a song, but they've also put it on stickers, and things like that. Here's one, Don't Worry Be Happy kind of thing. And it's a kind of nice sentiment, really. It's, you know, it's kind of nice.

But it's not really the solution to worry, is it? As though our mere positivity will suddenly conjure up food and clothes for us? Of course not.

Rather, the sticker or song should really go, Don't Worry, Trust God. Because he's the one who provides, right? But the bigger point is, we're not to be consumed by our concerns, whether they're the rising costs of living, the ongoing threat to religious freedom, or the continuing cases of COVID. It doesn't mean we ignore them and do nothing about them. Don't mishear me. We need to be wise, but we're not to be consumed with worry, so that they take first place in our lives.

Instead, we're to keep first things first, verse 31. So do not worry, saying, what shall we eat, or what shall we drink, or what shall we wear?

[18:36] For the pagans run after these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But, seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Therefore, do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own, and isn't that true? Each day does have enough trouble of its own. And so, we're to keep first things first.

That is, keep God first, by seeking his kingdom and his righteousness. Seeking his kingdom, is to seek the growth of God's kingdom in the world, the growth of God's rule over the world, where people grow as Christians, or become Christians.

That is, seeking the growth of God's kingdom in both maturity and number. And so, as a priority, we're to do what we can to see ourselves, ourselves and others, not just come to Christ, but grow in Christ.

Our church mission statement is that, if you've got one of those bulletins, at the bottom in the blue, is our mission statement. This has been in effect for five or six years, and I think some people still haven't seen it.

[19:44] So, let me show it to you. Our mission statement is to go, gather, and grow in Christ. That is, God's kingdom to grow. That's what it's saying.

And the way we do this, is the line underneath, by prayerfully proclaiming and promoting God's word in love. For it's God's word that is the means that God grows his church.

So, as a church, we're to remain committed to prayer, to proclaiming and promoting God's word this year, in love. What's more, we're to seek first his kingdom through partnerships.

It's so great that we can have St. John's people here today, because we're loving this partnership, and we want to continue that partnership. And it's great we can express it here today.

But we're also partnering with an Iranian church, and we're hoping to begin an Iranian congregation down the track, just starting off with a Bible study group. We're also committed to training up more leaders.

[20 : 40] Mark and Jeff have been doing a great job of doing that, and we had quite a number of young adults attend a conference last weekend, where they're trained and equipped to teach the Bible, to proclaim the word.

We want to remain committed to that this year, too. As individuals, you can be part of all this, whether it's by praying with us at our monthly prayer nights, or prayer afternoons, Wednesday, first Wednesday of the month, in the evening, second Wednesday of the month, in the afternoon, or praying with yourselves at home.

You can be part of this by reading the Bible yourselves, or in a Bible study group, or growth group, so that you can grow. You can be part of it by serving, so others can hear the Gospel, or teaching the Bible one-to-one, or kids' church, whatever it is, so that they can better know the Gospel, or speaking to non-Christians about the Gospel, or simply contacting others to encourage them in the Gospel.

These are the ways we can seek first God's Kingdom, and we're to seek first His righteousness, living His way in this world, which means, even when it's hard or unpopular, and we already know it's going to be more and more unpopular to live God's way, isn't it?

And yet, we're to seek first this. It means being committed to caring for God's people, as Jesus did. That's part of living out His righteousness, living rightly in this world.

[22 : 06] And that includes meeting with God's people regularly, if we can, weekly, if we can. Yes, we need to be wise and careful with COVID, but it cannot be first in our lives.

We're to keep first things first. God, His Kingdom, and righteousness. Well, let me finish. I've mentioned to some of you before, I'm not sure if the St. John's have heard this before, but there was a time when I drove Michelle to the hospital, because she was in labour with our third child. This was some time ago. And it was 4am in the morning, and when I arrived, there was absolutely no one in the car park, but I didn't park perfectly between the white lines. I was a bit out of kilter. And so as Michelle opened the door, I was about to leap out the car, leap, waddle out the car, she was in labour, poor thing. I said, hang on, let me just straighten up the car. And she looked at me and said, are you kidding?

I'm in labour, this baby's about to come. And she graciously closed the door nonetheless. But that's how not. To put first things first, right? Not. And so when it comes to God this year, let's not make my mistake.

[23 : 20] Let's keep God first. Even when it comes to those things that we started with at the beginning, those things on the screen, keep God first, not by storing treasure on earth, but in heaven.

By having a single focus on God, which is for our good anyway. And by not worrying, but seeking first his kingdom and righteousness. And so let's pray we would do that. I'm going to pause and leave you a moment to pray.

As I said at the start, this is a well-known passage. The difficulty is not getting it, it's doing it. And so why don't we spend a moment recommitting ourselves to God this year and asking for his help to put him first.

Let's pray. Let me close.

Our gracious Father, we do thank you so much that through the Lord Jesus, you have brought us into your family. You've forgiven us our sins and given us the hope of glory.

[24 : 36] Father, we pray because of who you are and what you've done, that you would help us this year to keep you first. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.