

First Things First

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[0:00] Well, please do grab your Bibles and turn back to Matthew chapter 6, page 971. It's a well-known passage, and I did get up too early because I've done it a few times today, and apologies to those who've heard hearing it for like the third or fourth time as well.

But with this passage, as I said this morning, it's not really so hard to understand. The trick is to actually put it into practice. And so we'll come back at the end and have a time to just pray individually for God's help to do that.

But to start with, let me give you some multiple choice questions. And the question is, which is more important to you when it comes to a good meal? Are you a mains person or a desserts person, I wonder?

Yeah, you think just this is rhetorical. You think about it yourself. You can call out if you really want to, but yeah, mains or desserts. What about this next one's quite controversial at the moment.

Do you call the McDonald's item potato cake or potato scallops? Cakes, come on. Well, actually, I think people agree because when they ran out, they even crossed out scallops and wrote the word cakes in there.

[1:16] But more seriously, which is more important to you, friends and family or money? I know I was supposed to say friends and family, but...

Or even, perhaps, given this kind of demographic here, a good career or a significant other? Oh, good career. Good career.

But I wonder what you would say if we added an option C to all of those, like, God. My guess is we know we ought to all choose C, right?

But it's not always easy to do, is it? To have God as the most important part or first importance in your life. Because there are so many other concerns we have, so many other distractions that pull us away from God.

Well, our passage today is in the middle of Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount, which Mark actually started here at 5pm. I picked this passage last year before I knew about 5 o'clock. But it's in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, and he's teaching his disciples what it means to live as members of the kingdom.

[2:30] And the multitudes of the crowd are listening in. That's chapter 5, verse 1 and 2. And today's passage, here in chapter 6, Jesus is essentially saying, to live as members of God's kingdom means first things first.

That is, keeping God first in our lives, choosing option C, in other words. And to help us do that, Jesus first tells us to not seek treasure on earth, but in heaven.

So, point 1, verse 19 and 20 in your Bible says, Do not store up for yourselves treasure on earth, where moth and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasure in heaven, where moth and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.

Now, is Jesus saying here, then, that we are not allowed to have a savings account? That we can't store up savings? Is Jesus against having superannuation, for example?

Of course not. After all, we're taught elsewhere in the Bible, for example, that children should not save up for parents, but parents for their children. There's some saving up, or storing up, if you like.

[3 : 38] Paul tells the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 16 to set aside some money at the start of each week, to save it up, in order to have it there ready to give for the collection at church.

Or Proverbs chapter 6 tells those who are sluggards in life to have a look at the ant, who works hard and stores its provisions in summer, so that they'll have enough for winter.

In other words, some storing up is actually part of being good stewards of what God has given us. And so Jesus is really saying, don't seek treasure on earth as your priority.

And don't make the pursuit of earthly treasure of first importance in your life. I caught up with a friend last week I hadn't seen for about 10 years, and so we're doing the, you know, whatever you've been up to for the last 10 years kind of thing.

He's a very gifted barrister, and he said that for a number of years, he worked as the in-house counsel for a company. And the company was sold because there was a really good offer on the table, and because he was such an asset to the company, you don't normally, this doesn't normally happen, but he actually got a share in the proceeds, the profit of the company, and he said, I got paid out a huge amount of money.

[4 : 58] And he didn't tell me a figure, so don't ask, but for him to say huge, it was big. And then he admitted, it made me greedy for more, he said.

And so I pursued a job at another company in order to build it up with the sole purpose of selling it off so that I could get another big windfall. You see, the pursuit of storing up earthly treasure became of first importance to him, such that it drove his decisions and desires.

And then he said to me, but Andrew, God kindly collapsed that company before it grew, and God showed me my sin. And so don't make storing up treasure on earth your priority.

After all, verse 19, it doesn't last. It's destroyed by pests or taken by thieves or collapsed by God. Instead, verse 20, do store up treasure in heaven, which does last.

How are we to do this? Well, by serving God in whatever way we can. Paul kind of says, has this idea in 1 Timothy chapter 6, where he's talking to the rich in particular, which compared to the rest of the world is probably most people in this room.

[6 : 13] But he commands them to be rich in good deeds, generous, willing to share, and in this way they will lay up treasure for themselves. There are many here who serve God, as I said before, whether it's serving here at church or caring for others behind the scenes or simply praying at home.

There's a guy from Nine O'Hawk Church who takes his dog for a walk every day, and he has a different list of people he prays for as he walks the dog every day. All this is how we store up treasure in heaven.

And so while there's many at our church, like that man, who don't have big earthly bank accounts, their heavenly bank account is bursting at the seams.

It's terrific, isn't it? But the reason Jesus tells us this is because it actually helps us to keep first things first, verse 21.

So don't store up treasure on earth, but do in heaven. Why? Verse 21. Because or for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

[7 : 24] You see, the location of our treasure shows the location of our heart, where it will be. And so if we store treasure in heaven, it will help us to have our hearts in heaven, on God.

And to have thou and thou only, the first in my heart, as we'll sing later on. Or as our first reading put it, to love God with all our heart, soul, 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 it's good for us.

Point to 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. Sounds pretty good. But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness.

If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness? Now these verses are a little bit tricky to understand, but I think the idea is, our eyes shape our lives.

[8 : 34] That is, what we set our eyes on shapes whether we have light to live well and right in this world, or darkness to stumble and fall.

And to help you see this, you need to know that the word healthy can mean generous, but it can also mean single focused. And so I think Jesus is saying, if our eyes are single focused on God, fixed on treasure in heaven, then it will give us light to see how to live our life in this world.

How to do it in a right way that's good for us. But verse 23, if our eyes are unhealthy, or literally evil, is the word, then our bodies will be full of darkness.

We won't see how to live rightly in this world. And so the motivation is, fix our eyes with a single focus on God, so that you'll see, if you have light, to see how to live rightly in this world for your good.

One of our church members at 1030 Church here at Doncaster is legally blind, with his permission. I can tell you his name is Jay. You might have seen him around.

[9 : 48] Sometimes he comes to five o'clock and he's got the cane with him. If you're seeing him, say hello to him. But you actually have to stand right in front of him so that he can see you, because he has no peripheral vision.

He just has this kind of laser beam straight out in front, this single focus. And when it comes to God, I think Jesus is saying, we're to be like Jay. And we're to have a single focus devotion on God.

And not let the peripheral things around us distract us from keeping God first in our lives. Because if we keep our single focus on God, it will give us light to live rightly in this world for our good.

And in fact, trying to have split loyalties just doesn't work. Verse 24. 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, not might be able to, but you cannot serve both God and money. There was only one winner of the female singles Australian Open.

[10 : 59] Only one winner of the male singles Australian Open. There's only one head chef in the kitchen. It just, you can't have more than one in those circumstances. It just doesn't work.

So also, there's only one ultimate master in life. Having more just doesn't work. If you try, you'll have divided loyalties. There's an old saying that says, too many cooks spoil the broth.

Have you heard of that one? It just doesn't work. And so, keeping first things first is actually good for us. It gives us light for our bodies 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, like money, is our worry. And so again, to help us keep first things first, Jesus then says, don't worry, but seek first God's kingdom.

Point three, verse 25. He says, therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink, or about your body, what you will wear, he says.

[12:09] Now, there are lots of things that can cause us to worry, like, you know, the rising cost of living or the job market. Are you going to get a job?

Like, the university exams that are going to, you're going to have to do this year if you're at uni, can't get around them. What you will do with your life leading forward for those who run households, whether, if you're living out of home, it's that cost of living.

I saw this article yesterday that talked about Kellogg's cereal on the rise. Two boxes of Cocoa Pox are on special for \$17. Sorry, \$17.10.

I mean, that's expensive stuff. Another reason to stick with Wik-Bix, isn't it? Then there's the ongoing uncertainty with COVID, which seems like it's here to stay.

All the uncertainty of religious freedom in our country. I got an email just last week about more moves to take away religious freedom for Christian schools in our state.

[13:12] There's lots of things that can cause us to worry this year. But Jesus says, don't. Don't worry. And by worry, he doesn't mean don't care.

Rather, he means don't be anxious in an ongoing way. The word worry here is in the present tense. In other words, he's talking about an ongoing thing.

Don't let our concerns consume us with stress such that they become first in our lives. Don't let our ongoing anxiety drive us to chase after these things to fix them or whatever, like the pagans do.

You see, when things happen, it's normal to be concerned and wonder, ooh, what am I going to do about that? It's what you do next that matters. Do we, when something like that happens, cast all our worry on God because he cares for us or do we let that worry drive our lives?

Do we trust God to provide or do we let our concerns consume us with stress? Don't mishear me. I'm not saying you do nothing. You still need to act, but what are you going to do without that worry?

[14:31] Is he going to consume you or are you going to cast it? Are you going to trust God or is he going to drive you? And we can trust God because he promises to provide.

See the rest of verse 25. Jesus goes on to say, is not life more than food and the body more than clothes? There are more important things in life than food and clothes, he's saying.

I know for some teenagers and young adults, it used to be just girls who found it hard to believe there's anything more important than clothes, but I know guys.

Some guys find it hard to believe there's anything more important than clothes. You know, the brand clothes thing. When I was growing up as a teenage boy myself, it was hard to believe there's anything more important than food.

That's all I cared about. In fact, when I was dating my wife Michelle, when she first cooked me a meal, I think it was at that moment, I said to myself, I'm going to marry this girl. Not the right criteria.

[15:34] But Jesus says here there are more important things than food and clothes. There's the life and the body. And so the idea is, if God has given us life and our bodies, which are more important, then will he not provide the less important things to look after it?

No, food to feed our life and clothes to clothes our body. Of course he will. After he does it for the birds who are less valuable than us. Verse 26.

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. And so we want to be anxious, first because God will provide for our needs, needs, not wants, I should say. And second, because worrying won't prolong our life anyway, verse 27.

Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? No, we can't. We can't extend our life by worrying. There remains 24 hours in the day.

[16:44] You know when you've got uni exams coming up and an assignment due or some work deadline, you're stressing out and you really wish there was more than 24 hours in a day, does it ever grow longer the day?

Of course not. We can't add a single minute by worrying. But if we stress and the BP goes up, you know, it could make our life shorter, couldn't it?

So we're not to be consumed by our concerns because it doesn't prolong our life and because God will provide for our needs, which is the reason Jesus returns to, this time talking about clothes instead of food, verse 28.

And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow, they do not labour or spin, and yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these.

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

[17:43] of course he will. In fact, to be consumed with worry about these things, as Jesus suggests at the end of verse 30 there, is to show a lack of faith in God to provide.

And so we are to have faith or trust that God will provide those things we need, that he thinks we need. There used to be a song around called Don't Worry, Be Happy.

I don't know if you've ever heard of that one. Anyway, it's on the stickers, on slogans and so on, and here's a sticker, Don't Worry, Be Happy. That's kind of a nice sentiment, isn't it?

Don't worry, just be happy. But it's not really the solution to worry, is it? As though by our sheer positivity, we'll conjure up food and clothes for us.

It doesn't work like that, does it? It's God who provides. And so the sticker should really say, don't worry, trust God. I'm not sure you'll see that on too many bumper bars though.

[18:45] But that's what it should be, for God is the one who will provide for us. But the bigger point in all this is we're not to be consumed by our concerns, whether, you know, whatever we're going to do the rest of our lives, or what we're going to face this year, continuing COVID cases, rising costs of living, and so on.

It doesn't mean we ignore them or do nothing about them. Don't mishear me. We need to be wise, but we're not to be so consumed with worry that they become first in our lives.

Rather, we're to keep first things first. Verse 31. Jesus goes on to say, verse 31, so do not worry, saying, what shall we eat, or what shall we drink, or what shall we wear, for the pagans run after all 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? So we're not to worry, instead we're to seek first God, his kingdom, and his righteousness.

[19:58] And to seek first his kingdom is to seek the growth of God's kingdom as a priority. That is doing what we can to see ourselves and others, not just come to Christ, but grow in Christ.

As a church, our mission statement is on the bottom of your bulletins. You know that blue bar at the bottom of your bulletins that we never look at. Just let me remind you, I only do this once a year. At the bottom, the mission statement is to go gather and grow in Christ.

It's talking about growing God's kingdom. And the means by which God does this, or the way we're to do it as well under God, is the next line under that, by prayerfully proclaiming and promoting God's word in love.

And so, as a church, that's how we are to seek first his kingdom this year, to remain committed to prayer, to proclaiming and promoting God's word in love.

And what's more, we're to seek first his kingdom through partnerships, and so we're continuing our partnership with St. John's, and we're starting another partnership with an Iranian church, starting off with a Bible study group and hoping that that will grow under God into a congregation.

[21:12] congregation. We're also committed to training up more leaders. Mark and Jeff are doing a great job of that. I know a number of people from this congregation went to the Engage conference last weekend to be trained in how to proclaim or teach God's word in love.

And as individuals, you can be part of this too by doing those things, praying with us, coming to our monthly prayer night or praying at home, reading the Bible in your growth group or on your own so that you yourselves grow.

Or serving so others can hear the Bible taught and the gospel proclaimed. Or teaching the Bible to others so that they can know the gospel better.

Or speaking to non-Christians about the gospel. Or simply contacting others to encourage them in the gospel. These are the ways you can seek first his kingdom this year.

And we're going to seek first his righteousness. That is, as a priority, do what we can to live rightly like God, live out God's ways in this world. Even when it's hard, even if it's dicey at work and unpopular, because I suspect it's going to become even more unpopular.

[22:37] God's love. It means also being committed to one another, caring for God's people, as Jesus did, which includes meeting together as his people, regularly, weekly, if we can.

Yes, we need to be wise and careful. COVID's still around, I should say. But COVID or anything else, it can't be first in our lives. We're to keep first things first, God, his kingdom and righteousness.

So as I finish, let me tell you a story about the time when my wife went into labour with our third child. So this is some time ago.

It was 4am in the morning when her waters broke. I don't know, I won't go into details or something. But anyway, it was 4am in the morning, rushed to the hospital, keep the speed limit, rushed to the hospital and the car part was empty.

But I didn't park perfectly between the white lines. And so just as my wife was about to leap out of the car, pregnant, waddle out of the car, I said, oh, hang on a second, let me straighten up the car.

[23:52] As if to say you've got to be kidding me. I'm in labour and you want to straighten the car. She very graciously closed the door. Let me tell you that's how not to put first things first.

And so this year, let's not make that mistake. This year, let's keep God first. Even when it comes to those things that we started with, whatever they are, those things that can distract us or take first place in our lives, keep God first by not storing treasure on earth but in heaven, by having a single focus on God which is for our good, and by not worrying but seeking first his kingdom and righteousness.

It's a well-known passage. There are some in this room who have heard it three or four times today. But again, the hard part is not understanding it, it's doing it.

And so let's pray. And why don't we take a moment for you to pray just quietly in your head and heart and recommit yourself to God this year.

Ask for his help to keep God first in your lives and then I'll close. Let's pray. Let me close.

[25 : 10] Gracious Father, we thank you for who you are and all you've done for us in Christ. And so help us, we pray, to keep you first in our lives.

In Jesus' name we ask. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.