

This is the fourth sermon in our series on Jesus' call to discipleship in the Sermon on the Mount. The overall shape of the Sermon on the Mount is designed both to form disciples and to create a compelling image of what discipleship entails. Jesus describes the *person* of the disciple in the beatitudes and affirmations and what they are to *do* in the commands. Last week Carson explored the *how* of our devotional life – the concrete ways that we practice and express our faith outwardly in acts of love and worship, and inwardly in study, and prayer. Jesus is asking that his disciples orient their displays of righteousness toward God's eyes and not toward the eyes of humans because God is the sole object of our faith.

And so as we look at today's portion of the sermon, Jesus points us toward three goals, embedded within three sets of opposing pictures that reveal Jesus' concern that we pursue *single-eyed* faith in the living God. Taken together, the whole of chapter six is Jesus' teaching on the nature of faith and the central question is: do we trust God enough to stop worshipping the idols we make of our possessions or of the admiration of others?

Let us hear the Word of our Lord from the gospel according to Matthew, chapter six, verses nineteen through thirty-four:

‘Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

‘The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

‘No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

‘Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But

strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

'So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.

This is the Word of the Lord.

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As I was preparing my sermon one day this week I was listening to an Internet radio station - a bit of a contradiction in terms, but there you have it. Anyway, as I was writing, I had to stop for a minute. You know how it is every now and then that a song will come on and send you off on a nostalgia trip. For me the song this week was Faithfully, by Journey. All of our high school students are thinking – isn't that from Glee? At first it didn't make me think of anything in particular, but it definitely set a familiar mood – I started singing along with Steve Perry... "I'm forever yours, faithfully." All of the sudden like a slow-motion montage in a bad John Hughes film; I was reliving some high school memories – full disclosure – I was not actually *in* high school when that song came out - my musical tastes were somewhat dated. I was just coming back to the present with that refrain in my head, "I'm forever yours, faithfully" a line that just speaks of permanence when the next Journey song came on – "I'll Be Alright Without You." Sort of killed the nostalgia trip...

I didn't check to see how many years passed between the writing of those two songs, but it caught my attention that someone could sing, "I'm Forever Yours, Faithfully" one moment and then the next "I'll Be Alright Without You". Then it occurred to me – is this not the case with our lives in general? Particularly when it comes to our relationship with God? We may come on Sunday and through songs and words affirm what we think we believe, "I'm Forever Yours, Faithfully," but then Monday comes along and half way through the business of our day we start to think about all of the other things that clamor for our attention and we find ourselves living as though, "I'll Be Alright Without You". We live with conflicting concerns that distract us and divide our loyalties.

Jesus wants to save us from our spiritual schizophrenia. As our pastor and teacher, he is telling us that in order to be free to pursue God faithfully, we must desire things that will liberate rather than enslave.

If the point of the *devotions*, or piety practices – as Carson put it last week – is to seek the Father's praise rather than the world's, then the point of the *goals* is to show us where to direct our ambition – toward the logic of the kingdom of God and its righteousness, rather than the logic of our culture with its shifting foundations. Jesus is telling those who seek to be his followers that in order to do so they will have to *completely reorient* their desires. And so he provides us with three sets of contrasting images – three pictures of reality that help us to lose faith in the gods of our culture and place trust the One who is Lord of heaven and earth.

1) *The first of the three goals is to divert our desires from treasures on earth, which ultimately disappoint, in favor of "treasures in heaven".*

John D. Rockefeller famously replied to the question: “How much is enough?” with, “Just a little bit more”. *Just a little bit more* sounds so simple and modest, but it names the limitlessness of our desire to accumulate. We pursue treasure because we think that our possessions will provide our security. But Jesus points to the reality that our security does not lie in our things. Stock markets fail, corporations downsize, and CEO’s sometimes funnel pensions into their own back pockets. We know the impermanent nature of things and so what we initially acquire in the name of security, we often find ourselves clinging to anxiously. So Jesus tells us to store up our treasures in heaven.

Later on in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus will tell a rich young man who asks, “How can I inherit eternal life?” “Go, sell all that you own, and give it to the poor, then you will have treasure in heaven; then come and follow me.” So the logic of God’s kingdom reminds us to make space for others in our lives – the most direct way to invest in the kingdom of heaven is to invest in the poor. Last year I talked a little with the Stewardship Division about a fascinating study by Christian Smith and Michael Emerson called *Passing the Plate: Why American Christians Don’t Give Away More Money*. I was completely stunned by the sheer magnitude of what American Christians could accomplish if they gave generously of their resources. If their work is an accurate picture of reality – and if you read the footnotes, you’d be hard pressed to think otherwise – we American Christians have within our power the means and the ability to solve the world’s food and water crisis, eradicate global illiteracy, rid the planet of polio and decimate the impact of malaria, sponsor thousands of new missionary efforts, quadruple the operating budget of organizations like *Habitat for Humanity* and still have enough money left over to pay off the debt of most struggling small congregations. Friends, we have the means and Jesus is telling us that discipleship means conversion to a new economics that place others in the forefront. Those who would follow Jesus are asked to practice simplicity so that others may experience the abundance of God’s grace and love.

The gods of this world will leave us disappointed. But before I get too far ahead of myself, it’s clear in the immediate context of the sermon that the treasures Jesus is speaking of cannot simply be reduced to our economic reality. It is not less than our economic reality, but it is more. In the previous section, Jesus tells his disciples to practice their devotion in private so that they are not tempted to seek the esteem of others. He now tells us, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be.” Our goals reveal the god we worship. Those goals can be worthy and good, but if they are not secured in a relationship with the living God, “we are going to be disappointed either by the moth of nature, the rust of time, or the thievery of people”.

If our goal is to impress others by acquiring personal treasures in fame or in fortune, our compass will always be tilted toward people and winning their admiration. Again, Jesus’ call to seek the kingdom of God is a call to shed the anxiety of always having to acquire the admiration of others. Jesus’ concern is not for the particulars of what we value, but moreover that anything we strive for can be a distraction from pursuing the kingdom of God and its righteousness.

What is it that you treasure? To what end do you direct all of your striving? These are fundamental questions of life – but they are essential questions for discipleship. What

have you ordered your life to pursue? How do you spend the majority of your time and money? It is no less true of us as a church as it is of us as individuals that the answer to those questions says everything about our relationship with God.

2) *The second goal is to see clearly.*

Jesus moves from talking about treasure to describing two ways of seeing. In doing so he says our eyesight will affect our entire body. If one's sight is properly set, then one's whole life will be luminous, but if one's vision is set on the wrong things, then one's whole life will be disordered and lead to a distorted picture of the things of our lives. The question of what we strive for is brought into sharp focus. The goal is never to eliminate the material possessions of our lives, but to keep them in proper perspective and to be in proper relation to them so that they are used for God's glory and not to govern our existence.

Jesus is telling us that our lives are bound and determined by the grace and providence of God, not by the rewards of success, awards, appointments, salaries, promotions, or property. All of these things, when pursued with the utmost attention of lives become powerful idols.

Throughout the first part of the Sunday School year, our high school students spent some time considering how we make moral decisions. We found early on that before we could even address the subject, we had to determine what could be considered "good and right". But in order to figure that out, we had to answer the much larger question – what is the purpose of our lives? The Westminster Catechism begins with the question, "What is the chief and highest end of man?" and is answered, "to glorify God and to fully enjoy him forever".

Jesus' parable contains both a blessing and a warning. There's much at stake in determining what we pursue with our lives. Building on the previous set of images, Jesus is telling us that if the eye is not clear on the matter of how we relate with that which we treasure then the whole of our lives is placed in jeopardy.

3) *The third goal is to see that Christ alone is the Lord of our lives.*

The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard understood this passage to describe the quintessential choice of human existence. In a culture awash in religious silliness, he was bold to write, "Each person must choose between God and the world, God and mammon. This is the eternal, unchangeable condition of choice than can never be evaded – no, never in all eternity."

Some scholars suggest that the Aramaic word *Mamonas* is left untranslated because Matthew intended for his readers and hearers to see that it is a spiritual force that seeks to draw us away from service to Christ. It means possessions or property. In and of itself, it is a neutral term, but Jesus is clear that anything that diverts our eyes from single-minded discipleship can become an idol.

I'm reminded of a story that I heard John Fife tell at the 2008 Montreat Youth Conference. It was about Clarence Jordan, the founder of the *Koinonia* Community, an

interracial farm in Georgia, and it's about the tension between seeking the esteem of the world and seeking the righteousness of God's kingdom. Moreover, it is about the *impossibility* of serving God while kneeling at the altar of the world.

In the early 50s it is said that Clarence asked his brother, Robert Jordon, who would later be a state senator and a justice on the Georgia Supreme Court, to be the legal representative of Koinonia Farm. His brother said:

“Clarence, I can't do that. You know my political aspirations. Why, if I represented you, I might lose by job, my house, everything I've got.”

“We might lose everything too, Bob.”

“It's different for you.”

“Why is it different? I remember, it seems to me, that you and I joined the church, the same Sunday, as boys. I expect when we came forward the preacher asked me about the same question he did you. He asked me, ‘Do you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior?’ And I said, ‘Yes.’ What did you say?”

“I follow Jesus, Clarence, up to a point.”

“Could that point by any chance be—the cross?”

“That's right. I follow him to the cross, but not on the cross. I'm not getting myself crucified.”

“Then I don't believe you're a disciple. You're an admirer of Jesus, but not a disciple of his. I think you ought to go back to the church you belong to, and tell them you're an admirer not a disciple.”

“Well now, if everyone who felt like I do did that, we wouldn't have a church, would we?”

“The question,” Clarence said, “is ‘*Do you* have a church?’”

Are we disciples if we seek anything other than the righteousness of God? Are we a church if we order our life together in such a way that our pursuit of God's kingdom is obscured by the concerns about things that nature, time, and circumstances can corrode?

The whole of the sixth chapter has been a call to faith. Jesus is asking his disciples to make sure that we keep the first commandment – that we have no other gods before God. That our vision is clear so we can turn our eyes away from the gods of our culture that would have us set our eyes on things that are ultimately insecure.

Jesus ends the fifth chapter by telling us to be perfect – or as Carson said a few weeks ago – fulfilling our purpose: being what we were created to be. The sixth chapter tells us that the way we fulfill our purpose is by choosing to allow God to regulate both our devotional life and our economic life.

Either human esteem or divine esteem will be Lord. Either we will be possessed by God, or we will be possessed by our possessions. But only one can set us free.

Let us pray.

Possessed by possessions, O Lord, we discover that we cannot will ourselves free of idols. Dispossess us, Father. Free our attention that we may be grasped by that which is so true, so beautiful, that we desire nothing else. Teach us to seek your kingdom and its

righteousness, knowing that that for which we seek can never be achieved, but can only be given freely by you. Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you. Give us your holy discontent for the acquisition of things which perish, but lead us into your eternal kingdom and give us the boldness to pray as you taught us, saying...