

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost; September 17, 2023

+ Matthew 6:24-34 +

+ God Gives the Best Life +

“No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and *mammon*.

“For this reason I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or 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 do not sow or reap or gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they?

“Which of you can add a single moment to his lifespan by worrying? Why do you worry about clothing? Consider how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor spin, but I tell you that not even Solomon in all his glory was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will he not clothe you even more, you of little faith?

“So do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For the unbelievers chase after all these things. Certainly your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first 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 take care of itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”

We are going to end in a place of rest. We are going to end in peaceful, joyful service to God. But first we’re going to a place God does not want us to be, the place unbelievers live: the place of the chase. **“So do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For the unbelievers chase after all these things.”** This is what unbelievers do, Jesus says: they chase after the things of this world. Whenever I walk here to church, especially on a weekday, I see symptoms of this frantic chase. I see speeding cars rear-ending each other, motorists shouting out their windows at each other, horns angrily honking, once even a brandishing. On the very day I walked in to write this sermon, a driver just could wait no longer for me to clear a crosswalk and screamed out his window, “Hurry up! I’ve gotta to get to work!” I did not shout back, only because Jesus got his hand over my mouth just in time.

The chase of the unbelieving world has many drivers behind it. There’s greed. There’s selfish ambition. And Jesus identifies another: worry. The unbeliever thinks like this: “I must provide for myself. I must secure food and clothes and shelter for myself. If I don’t, I’ll starve or freeze.” The unbeliever fills with worry about having what he’ll need. And he’s off to races, worried, chasing after it all.

Is it wrong to move fast? Is it wrong to want to get things done and make money and move ahead in the world? If it’s driven by worry, yes.

It’s also wrong if it’s driven by love for the things of this world. In the opening verses of the Gospel, Jesus identifies that problem, too: **“No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and *mammon*.”** If mammon, worldly stuff, is a person’s master, she will chase it because it rules her. She will chase it because she serves it.

Is it wrong to pursue worldly stuff? Is it wrong to want more? If that stuff is your master, your ruler, yes. If that stuff is what you serve, what you live for, yes.

Jesus gives two reasons unbelievers chase for stuff: worry and love of that stuff. But when Jesus speaks these words, he is not speaking to unbelievers. He is speaking to disciples. So why does he point out these problems and warn believers about them? Two reasons: first, we live in a world of mostly unbelief and unbelievers, a world where chasing in worry and love of stuff is the norm. That worldly influence pulls believers toward worry and love of stuff, because we are surrounded by it every day. But secondly, and more importantly: no believer is completely free from worry and love of stuff. It's in our hearts, even after we come to faith in Jesus. Even if the world weren't pulling me in that direction, the sin in me would, tugging me to chase and run and chase for the wrong reasons: worry, and getting stuff become my master.

Jesus says: slow down a minute. Look at this, Jesus says. Consider this, Jesus says. Remember this, Jesus says. Find rest in these truths. And then go again. Go to work without worry, serving the right master.

Slow down. Look at this: the birds of the air. **"They do not sow or reap or gather into barns and yet your heavenly Father feeds them."** God loves birds. He loves everything he made. In another place Jesus says the Father knows whenever a sparrow drops to the ground. But he loves you a lot more. It was only us humans that God crafted from the dust of the earth and breathed his own breath of life into. It is only we he made in his own image. And it's only we that he became one of. He did not send his Son as a sparrow to save sparrows. He sent his Son as one of us, to save us.

His Son asks the rhetorical question: **"Are you not worth much more than they?"** Of course you are. And the One who asks the question is your proof. He is here teaching these truths because he loves us and wants us to live according to God's will. He is here in this world to live free from worry, free from the love of things, full of faith in his Father. He is here to step into the place of every sinful worrier and stuff-server and save them with his perfect life. He is here to die for those sins and all sins. He is here to rise, to give us the kingdom of God for eternity.

You are most valuable to God, valuable enough to save for eternity in the work of his Son. Stop, Jesus says, and look at the birds of the air.

And stop, Jesus says, to consider: **"Which of you can add a single moment to his lifespan by worrying? Why do you worry about clothing? Consider how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin, yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his glory was dressed like one of these."** Consider all the good worry does you. It adds no time to your life; it can certainly subtract, but not add. And it gives you nothing else, either. If I stand here worrying hard about clothes for the next three hours, will clothes suddenly appear? But if I trust God to provide and calmly put his talents to use, will they come then? And if I'm really up against it for some reason or cannot work, will God not move my fellow Christians to give me what I need? **"If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will he not clothe you even more, you of little faith?"** As you are much more valuable than a bird, you are also much more valuable than a lily. If God clothes them, he will clothe you, too.

Look at the birds of the air eat, and know your value compared to theirs. Look at the clothes of the lilies of the field, and know your value compared to them. **"So do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or**

‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For the unbelievers chase after all these things. Certainly your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.”

Not only are you infinitely valuable to God, but he is more than your God. He is your Father. You are his child, and he loves you in Christ. He is not only your Father; he is your *heavenly* Father. He is in the position of total knowledge and power, reigning over all things and knowing all things, including everything you need.

So much for worry, then. What about serving stuff, letting it become your master? That also drives the frantic, unbelieving chase. **“No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and *mammon*.”** For many Christians in this part of the world, serving the wrong master is more likely than worry to lead us into the unbelieving chase. Because most of us are not so worried about where our next meal or pair of shoes will come from, but instead many of us have so much stuff that we start to fall in love with it and serve it.

Consider those lilies again. They and their beautiful clothes will tomorrow be thrown into the fire. So will your food and clothes, and all the other stuff of this world. It’s here today, gone tomorrow, and gone forever.

But God is forever. The salvation he gives us in his Son is forever. His kingdom is forever. So is your soul, and so is your body, thanks to Jesus’ resurrection. Through faith in Jesus, God’s kingdom is yours forever. First seek that everlasting kingdom, and you will not fall in love with and serve temporary stuff. The unbelieving chase for what doesn’t last will end, and your heart will rest in the kingdom that lasts forever.

Here is how to seek God’s kingdom first: open your eyes and ears to his love in Christ. Take and use a devotion book from the table in the narthex. We don’t order very many, and it saddens me when most of them go into the garbage at the end of the month. Those little books are full of Bible-based gospel about God’s love and grace in Christ. Have a daily devotion with yourself, with someone you love. Taste and see Jesus’ love for you, the eternal value he places on you, as you commune often. Return to the saving waters of baptism, where God gave you faith and a place in his everlasting kingdom.

Seek his kingdom first by focusing on his love in Christ. And your heart will rest there, not with your stuff. And the unbelieving chase for stuff – all traces of that faithless chase – will start to fade from your life.

And what will come in its place? A life of laziness that sits back and waits for God to miraculously provide for you? A freeloader existence where you mooch off your fellow believers? A childish twisting of Jesus’ words not to worry about tomorrow into an excuse to have no plan for your life? Of course not. Any Christian who lands in those places is not thinking this through.

You will still move. In fact, you’ll still move hard. You’ll move fast. You’ll plan, work, strive, and struggle. But you’ll do it in faith instead of worry. And you’ll do it in service to God instead of stuff. What a blessed life! What a miraculously beautiful existence!

And it’s interesting: Christians who are set free to run without chasing, to work without worrying, to serve God instead of stuff, will end up running faster and working harder and serving more strongly than unbelievers! Because worry and love and stuff weigh you down and robs you of joyful energy. Some of the most productive and successful Christians I’ve met have been those with the strongest faith, who seek

the kingdom first. And they end up blessed in every direction. As he promises, God adds to them everything they need for this life, and often much more. And they get it all worry-free, joyfully serving God with hearts at rest in his kingdom.

Do you see what God intends for us? This is what Jesus means when he says in another place, **“I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”** Life in the kingdom forever, thanks to Jesus. And, in the meantime: a life of hard work without worry, of running in service to God instead of chasing in service to stuff, hearts at rest in God’s kingdom and Jesus’ righteousness. Amen.