

“First Things First”

(Matthew 6:19-34)

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When I was in my former church, I got a chance to go on mission trips down to Guatemala, to minister to the Indian people in the highlands who had been devastated by thirty years of civil war. Our team was asked to visit a boys' penitentiary that held about 400 boys from 10 to 20 years old, incarcerated for everything from petty theft to murder and rape. We had gifts to give, care packages with tooth brushes and socks. I felt like the gifts were pathetic.

As we drove there in our van, I wondered what in the world I could have to share with them, me a part of a team of white, middle class people who had no understanding of what they'd been through. But I felt the Lord put Psalm 51 on my heart, where David says, “Against you and you alone have I sinned.” I'm not sure why that; it's not the normal inspirational text you would turn to.

When we arrived, it really did look like a grim and moldering prison. They lined up the boys, and I shared the reading from the Bible, and then I said a very simple message like, “No matter what you've done, no matter how you've hurt or been hurt by others, Jesus loves you. If you trust in him, you can be free, even in this place.” After a couple minutes I had finished, so I turned to leave. Then someone caught me by the arm and told, me, “There are some boys who want to become Christians.” I turned, and twelve boys were there, raggedy and barefoot, and they wanted Jesus. It was a picture of his absolute priority, and of the kingdom breaking in even a dark place like that juvenile prison. No other gifts I could bring would really matter compared with him.

If we really trust Jesus, we value what he values. We arrange our lives as if treasure in heaven is all that really matters. Treasure in heaven means investing in the kingdom, and that's another way of saying being in relationship with Jesus. Nothing stacks up against the value of knowing Jesus. Like the Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians,

I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ. (Philippians 3:8)

Jesus himself is our treasure, and the purpose of our life is to prepare for eternity in heaven with him. Compared with the greatness of knowing Jesus, is it any wonder he warns us about letting anything else get in the way of knowing him? Jesus taught a great deal about wealth, and he put it into perspective for his disciples.

Like when he says to the rich young man,

"One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me" (Mark 10:21).

That is, nothing compares with the excellence of knowing Jesus, of serving him, of enjoying him. Nothing else can get in the way of that, which Jesus makes clear when he says,

"Whoever does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:33).

Jesus' call to follow him is radical, in the sense that it's total: it has to do with everything we are, so it also has to do with everything we have.

If we took seriously what he says, God would unleash the power of his Holy Spirit, and use us to change the world. I think as Christians, we know that money and things don't make people happy, but sometimes we act as if we didn't believe it. Jesus says live simply, cultivate a passion to see his kingdom come, that's a far happier way to live than in luxury.

Jesus' disciples learned that lesson. The early church knew it. Francis of Assisi and the early monastic movements knew it. John Calvin and the Reformers knew it, and it helped to restore the church in a time when people had gotten sick of its corruption. The Puritans knew the joy that came from simplicity, and so did John Wesley. I like the way he talked about money. He said, "Having, First, gained all you can, and, secondly saved all you can, then give all you can."¹ That's good advice. Take everything you have and everything you are, and use it for the kingdom. It's the only sure investment.

Now, in the text we look at today, there are three commands. They not only tell us what's right and good, they are for our joy.

First, "Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven" (verse 20.)

The same command comes in negative form, too: "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth."

"Seek first the kingdom" is the main principle of the chapter. It's telling us to passionately pursue God's in your life, to passionately pray for his reign, "Thy kingdom come" over the entire world. It means we are to value what is of supreme worth, and that is Christ. Jesus himself is our treasure.

Second, "Do not be anxious," comes three times.

"Do not be anxious about your life." (verse 25)

"Do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?'" (verse 31)

"Do not be anxious about tomorrow." (verse 34)

Not being anxious is how we overcome the hold of earthly treasure and get our focus on heavenly treasure that lasts. When we trust in God's promises we're set free from anxiety, and in this freedom the lust for earthly treasures loses its hold on us.

¹ John Wesley, *Sermon 50: The Use of Money (Luke 16:9)*. *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/sermons.v.1.html#v.1-p0.3> Retrieved March 26, 2009.

Third, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness" (verse 33)

Laying up for treasures in heaven is an example of what seeking the kingdom looks like. It has to do with repudiating earthly riches for their own sake, and passionately pursuing God. It means making God your highest priority and the delight of your heart.

Those commands show what Jesus wants us to be like: investing in heaven, free from anxiety, and seeking his kingdom.

Let me ask you: if you were to lay up treasure in heaven, and didn't have to fear anything, and you were to seek the kingdom above all, how would you invest your life? What would you do to make a difference? How would you live so that when life comes to a close, you could say your life counted? To be a part of God's purpose in the world, to be a part of God's answer to the prayer, "Thy kingdom come."

Like Jesus says in Luke,

"Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. (Luke 12:32-33)

We have a hard time living like a disciple of Jesus if we think this world is our home. But it's not. This world is not our home, and we're just passing through, just resident aliens. When we remember that, we show that Jesus is our home; he's our comfort, and our goal.

One way believers are seeking the kingdom first is to bring the good news about Jesus to the Muslim world, and I want my friend Homer to share how he's a part of doing that.