

Seeking First the Kingdom and God's Righteousness

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*But seek ye first
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—Matthew 6:31,33

THROUGHOUT HUMAN

history it has always been necessary to expend significant effort to provide for oneself and those dependent upon us. Earning a living has seldom been easy, and for many it has become more difficult with the constant changes in our modern world.

Years ago, people might have worked at only one company their entire life. In today's business environment that is rare. Globalization has resulted in the relocation of many factory and office jobs to other places in the world where wages and benefits are significantly less, causing job losses at home.

Another potential impact to future employment may be Artificial Intelligence, known also as “AI.” This technology began in the 1950s and was founded on the claim that human intelligence can be so precisely described that a machine can be made to simulate it. AI uses computer systems to mimic human brain functions such as learning and problem solving. During the 21st century AI has experienced a resurgence, and some experts herald the future benefits of AI for many applications, such as speech recognition and autonomously driven vehicles. Other experts believe AI may result in mass unemployment. Globalization, AI and perhaps many other factors could cause us to have much anxiety regarding our ability to earn a living.

A LESSON FOR OUR DAY

In a portion of Jesus’ teachings, commonly referred to as the Sermon on the Mount, he told his followers, “Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed?” (Matt. 6:31) The use of the word “therefore” implies that Jesus was connecting these words with something he had just previously said.

Similar words to the above are also noted in Luke 12:29, and in the beginning of that chapter an event is recorded which we believe prompted Jesus to give this admonition. A large crowd had gathered, and after Jesus gave three lessons for their benefit, someone in the crowd asked the Master a totally unrelated question, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” Jesus used this opportunity to teach an important

concept, and he said to them all, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”—Luke 12:13,14, *New International Version*

PARABLE OF A RICH MAN

Jesus then gave a parable to emphasize this lesson. He said, “The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops. Then he said, This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I’ll say to myself, You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry. But God said to him, You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?” Jesus then summarized the lesson of the parable, saying, “This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich towards God.”—Luke 12:16-21, *NIV*

Returning to Matthew chapter 6, we find recorded these words of Jesus, which he said after giving the parable: “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”—Matt. 6:19-21

OUR TREASURE

Our “treasure” is quite likely those things which we think or talk about the most, and which give us the most inward satisfaction and joy in life. Such

“treasure” could be our job, the place where we live, the car we drive, money, possessions, prestige, the admiration of others, and various other aspects of our present fleshly life which bring us satisfaction. Truly, if such temporal things are our “treasure,” that is where our hearts will be mostly focused. Jesus, however, instructed us to store up “treasures in heaven.” Let us, then, consider what heavenly treasure is, and how we are to gather and store it up.

When we die and, if found faithful, are resurrected to the spirit nature, we will bring none of our earthly goods with us to the heavenly realm. Our clothes, dwelling place, automobile, bank accounts, and all other temporal possessions will be left behind. Instead, the only thing related to this life which we will bring with us is our consecrated heart, mind and character. The question we should thus ask ourselves at the present time is: What are we storing up, or developing now, as it relates to these all-important matters of our Christian life?

The heavenly treasures which our Father is pleased to have us gather are briefly summarized in the Apostle Paul’s listing of the fruits of the Spirit, which are stored up as we develop them in our hearts and minds and demonstrate them in our daily life. This fruitage includes the character qualities of love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance. (Gal. 5:22,23) The laying up of these eternal treasures is not the work of a day, but continual effort and diligence throughout our Christian walk are required.

The Apostle Peter adds to the list of heavenly treasure which we should store up, saying: “Giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; And to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; And to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity [love].” (II Peter 1:5-7) Peter then adds: “For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. ... For if ye do these things, ye shall never fall.” (vss. 8,10) Indeed, it is a life-long work to develop these treasures of Christian character.

OUR “EYE”

Returning to the words of Jesus recorded in Matthew chapter 6, he says: “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 evil, your whole body will be full of darkness. Therefore, if the light within you has turned to darkness, how great is that darkness! No one can serve two masters, because either he will hate one and love the other, or he will be loyal to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and riches.”—vss. 22-24, *International Standard Version*

Here we believe Jesus used the word “eye” symbolically to refer to our singleness of purpose in life. How important it is for us to adjust our vision as to how we “see” our aims and hopes in the present life. If we have healthy spiritual eyesight, we will place more value upon spiritual things and upon our future, in comparison with our present life, and thereby set our priorities appropriately.

As we do so, we will be more and more enabled to look upon the issues and concerns of the present and view them from the standpoint of our eternal spiritual welfare.

DO NOT BE ANXIOUS

Then Jesus said, “Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?” (Matt. 6:25, *English Standard Version*) Worry and anxiety will not change the facts of a situation or problem and thus accomplishes nothing worthwhile. Most importantly, anxiety can be detrimental to our Christian development because it can undermine and erode our faith in God and his promises, and it can also cause discouragement.

Some have mistakenly concluded that Jesus meant we should be completely careless regarding our future needs. However, God has not given us this principle in his creation nor in the Scriptures. In nature, for example, God has arranged seasons for the various plants to begin life, grow, produce fruitage, and finally to harvest. In order for a farmer to have a crop to harvest, first the soil must be carefully prepared, then appropriate seeds must be planted in a correct manner, followed by adequate watering and sunshine. Adverse weeds must also be carefully and continually removed.

God has intended that we recognize similar principles in our life. Most of us probably do not grow all the food we eat, nor do we build our own houses or make our own clothes. Therefore, we need to

buy food, which requires a certain amount of money. Necessary funds are also required to have a place in which to dwell, and to have clothes to wear. In order to provide these things consistently for ourselves and our families, we need income and, therefore, must work at some type of job.

PROVIDING FOR FUTURE NEEDS

We should reject the idea that Jesus was teaching us to be careless or thoughtless regarding our daily and future material needs. Jesus never instructed his disciples along these lines. For example, after Jesus miraculously fed a great multitude using only five barley loaves and two small fishes, he instructed his disciples, saying, “Gather up the fragments that remain, that nothing be lost.” The disciples gathered and filled twelve baskets with the fragments of the five barley loaves.” (John 6:1-13) Here Jesus gave an important lesson, in that the fragments helped provide food for the next day. It is also encouraging to our faith to notice that as a result of following Jesus’ instructions, each of the twelve apostles had a basket filled with fragments of the barley loaves—not one of them was forgotten!

Another example, from the Old Testament, is the account of Pharaoh’s two dreams, recorded in Genesis 41:1-36. In the first dream, seven fat cattle first appeared, but were then eaten by seven thin cattle. The second dream was similar—seven fat ears of corn first appeared, but were then eaten by seven shriveled ears of corn. God permitted Joseph to interpret the meaning of Pharaoh’s dreams, which indicated that there would be seven years of bountiful harvest in Egypt, followed by seven years of

famine. Joseph advised Pharaoh to store one-fifth of the harvest during each bountiful year, so there would be adequate food during the seven years of famine. Here we see again the important lesson of not being careless or thoughtless concerning future needs.

What then did Jesus mean when he said we should not worry or be anxious about our life, what we will eat or drink, or what we will wear? We believe the Master meant we should not worry or be anxious about these things in the sense of letting material or earthly matters become our primary focus in life—that is, our “treasure.”

Before we gave ourselves in full consecration to serve God, we may have thought of all our possessions on earth as our own. However, when we dedicated our lives to God and the doing of his will, we gave him our “all.” He, then, became the owner of everything in our possession, and we were made “stewards,” or “custodians,” over all these things, to use them to the greatest extent possible in his service, and for our eternal spiritual interests.

Consecrating ourselves to God does not mean that we should have no possessions, nor that we cannot love any of our fellow human creation. Jesus did not mean that a husband should not love his wife, nor a wife her husband. He did not mean that parents cannot love their children, nor children their parents. He did not tell us that we should not appreciate and love the beauties found in nature. On the contrary, in the verses which follow Jesus draws our attention to lessons learned by observing nature. Jesus simply meant that none of these earthly things should become our “treasure.”

LESSONS FROM NATURE

Jesus then proceeded to give examples from nature. He said: “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? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labour or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these. 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, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, What shall we eat? or What shall we drink? or What shall we wear? ... Your heavenly Father knows that you need them.”—Matt. 6:26-32, *NIV*

Finally, in verse 33 Jesus tells us, “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness.” The Greek word translated “first” in this text is defined by *Strong’s Greek Dictionary* as first “in time, place, order, or importance.” In other words, Jesus admonishes that the work of first or primary importance in our life should be that of seeking the kingdom of God, and seeking his righteousness.

SEEK FIRST THE KINGDOM OF GOD

One way we can seek first the kingdom of God is by becoming like a little child. Jesus taught his followers, saying, “Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child shall in no wise enter therein.” (Luke 18:17) This does not mean we should keep ourselves in a child-like state with

regard to knowledge and wisdom, nor to remain with an undeveloped character. Rather, Jesus meant we should become childlike in the sense of learning to trust God completely and with simplicity, thereby becoming humble, teachable and obedient towards him. As the psalmist wrote, “When I am afraid, I will put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid.” (Ps. 56:3,4, *ESV*) The Scriptures also tell us, “Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.”—Prov. 3:5,6

Another important element in seeking first the kingdom of God is that of having cheerful endurance when going through persecutions, tribulations, or difficulties in life. The Apostle Paul spoke from personal experience regarding persecutions and tribulations. After being nearly stoned to death in the city of Lystra, he departed the next day with Barnabas to the town of Derbe and preached the gospel in that city, teaching many. Then Paul did something quite remarkable. He returned to Lystra, where he had recently been stoned, and exhorted the brethren there to “continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God.” (Acts 14:1-22) How this must have encouraged and strengthened the brethren in Lystra!

SEEK FIRST RIGHTEOUSNESS

It is not enough that the Lord’s followers seek the kingdom of God, because one might have wrong motives for doing so, such as selfishly seeking to

attain honor and glory, or desiring to have power and authority. Therefore, Jesus said that we should not only seek the kingdom, but also seek righteousness. (Matt. 6:33) Jesus taught at the beginning of his sermon on the mount, “Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.” (Matt. 5:6) This thought includes the development of a deep and lasting desire to follow righteous principles in our daily life, striving in both little and big matters to be righteous, just, loving, and peaceable.

One practical example of seeking righteousness is learning to speak evil of no one. We are not to join in, nor be sympathetic towards, slander, gossip, or evil surmising. On the contrary, we are to think upon and rejoice in those things which are true, honest, just, pure, lovely, and of good report.” (Phil. 4:8) Much of our time should be devoted to self-examination as to whether we are truly seeking first the righteousness which comes from God and from his Son, Christ Jesus. Such righteousness is not to be merely in terms of dollars and cents, but also in words and actions. Additionally, we are to be righteous in our thoughts—towards our Heavenly Father, our brethren, our neighbors, and even ourselves. Paul said that the weapons of our spiritual warfare are “mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds; Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ.” —II Cor. 10:4,5

Another way to seek righteousness is by having the proper reaction when persecuted or ostracized

because of striving to follow after that which is right and good. As Jesus taught, “Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven.”—Matt. 5:10-12

To seek God’s righteousness means to develop that which would “exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.” (vs. 20) Many religious leaders during Jesus’ earthly ministry were careful to outwardly follow certain rules and traditions, but inwardly they had not developed a proper heart attitude. (Matt. 23:25-28) In the book of Hebrews we are admonished: “Exhort one another daily, while it is called To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.” (Heb. 3:13) Here the word “hardened” comes from a root word in the Greek language which means “hard, tough, harsh, severe.” Let us examine ourselves each day and make every effort to avoid having a spirit or heart attitude which is hard or severe, but instead develop the spirit of love, which is a Godly spirit.

The righteousness we are to seek is that “which is of faith.” (Rom. 10:6; Phil. 3:9) A love for such righteousness must originate from within our heart. As the apostle further wrote, “With the heart man believeth [has faith] unto righteousness.” Then, Paul continues, by our words and accompanying actions “confession is made unto salvation.”—Rom 10:10

FAITHFUL IN ALL THINGS—TEMPORAL AND SPIRITUAL

As noted earlier, most of us are faced with the necessity of making a living during a good portion of our lives. Regardless of how we do this, we must give proper attention to it. If employed by someone else, whether an individual or a company, we should render faithful service. If we have our own business, we should give proper attention to it, in order to provide whatever service we have committed to others. There are no set rules given in the Bible regarding exactly how much time and effort we should devote to our material needs. Each follower of Christ must determine this himself, according to individual circumstances, realizing that all matters of life, whether temporal or spiritual, are to be under the guidance and direction of the Lord.

Our need to eat, to clothe ourselves, and to have a place to live is very real. This being the case, it can become a severe test of our faith to rise above these things and to “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.” The strength which will help us in this struggle emanates from our faith, and “faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” (Rom. 10:17) This means that in order to have the faith necessary to seek first the things of God, we must study his Word and believe it.

Finally, we call to mind this all-important admonition of Paul: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”—Phil. 4:6, *NIV* ■