

FOCAL TEXT

Matthew 6:19–34

BACKGROUND

Matthew 6:19–34

MAIN IDEA

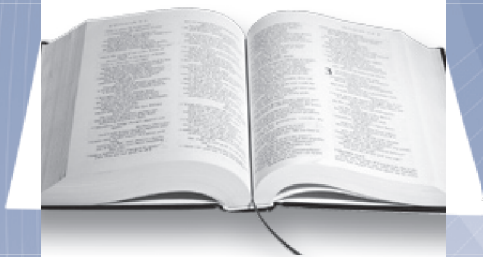
Disciples are to trust God and value God's way so much that they stop emphasizing and worrying about material things.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

Which has your closest attention—God or material things?

TEACHING AIM

To lead adults to decide how they will focus their lives on God rather than on material things



UNIT TWO
Learning from Jesus

80

LESSON SEVEN
*Trust God and
Stop Worrying
About Things*

BIBLE COMMENTS

Understanding the Context

Jesus' message in this section revolves around two poles: (1) don't be possessed by your possessions (Matthew 6:19–24); and (2) don't be possessed by worry (Matt. 6:25–34). Jesus' practical wisdom for these two areas is supported by observable examples. For one's proper relationship to material goods, Jesus drew on two parables or illustrations: the eye (6:22–23) and the relationship of masters and slaves (6:24). Both parables show listeners that they can choose either loyalty to God or loyalty to material wealth.

Jesus' second teaching on avoiding worry also draws from observations related to nature: birds (6:26) and flowers (6:28). In these observations, Jesus employed a rabbinic argument of lesser to greater also called minor to major. The force of the argument is that if something is true in a small matter, how much more must it be true for something of greater value. For Jesus, God's concern and provision for birds and flowers is a testimony to how much more God provides for humanity.

In this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus provides teachings that are not abstractions and hypothetical cases but are found in the concrete realities of life, such as eating, drinking, buying clothes, and dealing with money. These issues confronted the disciples of the first century and also confront disciples of the twenty-first century. Jesus' theological insights, likewise, are not abstractions and pious platitudes. They are grounded in his experience of God's presence and provision.

Interpreting the Scriptures

Treasure versus True Treasure (6:19–21)

6:19. Literally Jesus instructs his disciples to *not treasure for yourselves treasures on earth*. His focus is on those who acquire and hoard material goods, and in the greedy process of which they cause injustice, injury, and disregard for the welfare of others. Especially in the ancient world, where all goods were believed to exist in a limited and finite amount,

to hoard meant someone else was doing without. Treasuring up treasures meant a person was concerned only for his or her own welfare and not the larger community. The parable of the rich man and the bigger barns (Luke 12:15–21) is a good example of this mentality as the rich man focused only on himself.

Jesus' discourse against earthly treasures illustrates the well-established fact of the temporary nature of material goods; metal rusts, and clothing can be eaten by moths. As tangible as material goods appear, they are only fleeting distractions destined ultimately for the curb and the garbage. If the natural process of decay does not consume material goods, the chance always exists they will be stolen by a like-minded greedy soul.

6:20–21. Jesus does not rule out storing up all treasures, but he encourages storing up treasure of a different kind. Chapter 5 highlighted these treasures: compassion, meekness, peacemaking, and working for righteousness (justice). These treasures carry real value because they pay attention to the needs of others. The difference is between practicing self-giving service instead of self-serving behavior. Of course, one can always attempt to justify making more money or getting more goods. Yet Jesus sticks a pin in this balloon with the pointed truth that “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Parable of the Eye (6:22–23)

Jesus reinforces the danger of an acquiring spirit with a parable on the eye. He contrasts a healthy eye with an unhealthy (literally *evil*) eye. Perhaps a better way to capture the meaning of this illustration is that Jesus is contrasting a sincere eye (one that sees with focused kindness and empathy towards another) versus an evil eye.

The idea of the evil eye was prominent in the ancient world, but our biblical translations often obscure this point. An evil eye is an accumulative eye filled with desirous envy. When it possesses a person, he or she will do anything necessary to get and gain. Such an eye creates darkness within a person because it values things over people.

Parable of Two Masters (6:24)

The second parable, about slaves and masters, is about divided loyalties between God and wealth. In the King James Version, wealth is called “mammon,” which is Aramaic and means wealth stored away in banks, treasuries, storehouses, or property. In being contrasted with God, mammon is personified as an entity to which one pledges allegiance. Mammon calls for one’s trust and hope, and it commands a person’s time and passions. As one writer notes, money “. . . uses us and makes us servants by bringing us under its law and subordinating us to its aims.”¹

Needs and Worries (6:25–31)

6:25. In these next verses is an unstated but underlying thesis: *God cares for us*. Jesus does not make this thesis explicit because this truth should be self-evident in our understanding of God’s nature as revealed in Scripture and in the world. Since God cares for us, worry is an unnecessary hindrance to living. To make his point, Jesus lists a series of foundational needs: food, drink, and clothing. These elements are basic for an economy, and they are crucial for a person’s physical existence.

As important as these needs are, Jesus teaches not to be concerned about them. He then presents his listeners with a rhetorical question, “Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?” While the obvious implied answer is *yes*, Jesus does not at this point reveal what the “more” is. He reserves the “more” answer until 6:33.

6:26. Jesus supports his teaching on God’s providential care by drawing from nature and the everyday experience of seeing birds eating seeds and bugs. Any analogy is imperfect, for even birds suffer during times of drought and famine. Jesus’ point, though, is that the gracious hand of God that feeds and nurtures the sparrows also provides for disciples.

6:27. To reinforce the futility of worry, Jesus lays before his disciples another rhetorical question that challenges the listeners to understand the worthlessness of worry. The insight Jesus presents is a mathematical one: worry does not add any length to a person’s life. Actually, modern research show just the inverse; worry in many instances shortens one’s life.

6:28–29. A popular saying is “clothes make the person.” Full television shows focus on what to wear or not wear. In the ancient world, clothing was also important not only for protection from the elements, but also because one was able to distinguish by clothing another person’s role in society. Clothing was a visual social clue on how one *should* be treated and how one *would* be treated. Those with robes of purple were treated quite differently from those with robes of rags.

6:30. Jesus contrasts the clothing of lilies with King Solomon, who was the paradigm of royal splendor. With another rhetorical question based on the lesser to greater argument, Jesus challenged his listeners to see God’s provision. The answer Jesus seeks to elicit from the ones of “little faith” is an acknowledgement that God is even more concerned about disciples and their clothing than about the flowers that come and go quickly.

6:31–32. In the ancient world, and frequently in Matthew’s Gospel, Gentiles are the illustration for negative behavior. This verse portrays one of these examples. Jesus contrasts the way of disciples with the larger Gentile approach to material goods, which is one of accumulation. Today, instead of Gentiles, we might substitute the greedy or the insecure. The issue is not an ethnic group but an acquiring spirit that culminates in being desirous and filled with wants. As Jesus teaches, this type of spirit misunderstands the generous Spirit of God, who already knows humanity’s needs.

The Goal of Discipleship and Living (6:33–34)

6:33. In Jesus’ sermon, striving for God’s justice (righteousness) continues to be a repeated theme. Justice does not just happen, magically or without effort. Justice occurs when individuals work together for the kingdom of God, in which fairness, compassion, and honesty can grow and thrive. When this justice of God happens, the hungry are fed, the naked are clothed, the stranger is welcomed, and the sick and imprisoned are visited (Matt. 25:35–36). The second part of this verse makes sense when justice is the goal of striving disciples: “all these things will be given to you as well.” Worry is unnecessary when God’s provision is found in the bounty of disciples practicing the values of the kingdom.

6:34. In an oral society, sayings or memorable lines were often what people took away from listening to storytellers. In this verse, Jesus ended with an aphorism, a powerful and memorable saying that his audience was to stitch into their memory in order to draw on it during difficult times. The common-sense saying emphasizes living in the present moment and not worrying about the future. Worry distracts us from God's presence in the present.

Focusing on the Meaning

When it comes to material possessions, advertising conditions us every day that supersizing is superior, more is better, and the fastest and latest are best. Jesus' message is a healthy antidote to a culture of accumulation. Mammon, however, is alive and well, and we often walk hand-in-hand with it. Jesus' challenge is simple: *With whom will we choose to spend our lives? God or mammon?* Perhaps we can draw strength and encouragement from the choice made by another early follower of Jesus who answered this question. Paul the Apostle told the Philippians, ". . . I have learned to be content with whatever I have" (Philippians 4:11b).

Jesus' words of warning about material possessions are also a reminder to consider the larger picture beyond ourselves. To be concerned and work only for one's welfare, situation, and good is to lose sensitivity to the world all around us. These words are needful in a world in which resources become concentrated in the hands (or pockets and wallets) of only a few. These verses teach us that we are part of a larger and interrelated community, one that includes birds and flowers, and that God's attentiveness is on all aspects of creation.

A popular song some years ago had the lyrics, "Don't worry, be happy."² The lyrics to the symphony of discipleship called the Sermon on the Mount are, *Don't worry, trust God.* This truth is not a gilded platitude, a Pollyanna perspective, or a saying to cast about casually. It should be uttered with a deep-seated trust and humility in the faithfulness of God. Trust liberates; worry entraps. Worry wraps a person in fear, and fear causes one to make poor if not disastrous decisions. To trust in the goodness of God and the people of God is to find one's way in the midst of any journey.

TEACHING PLANS

Teaching Plan—Varied Learning Activities

Connect with Life

1. Before class assemble the following items and display them in random order on a table: picture frame; wallet or checkbook; keys; loaf of bread; coat hanger; golf ball or fishing reel.
2. Divide the class into groups of two to six members. Ask each team to identify each object with some aspect of contemporary life (for example, the picture frame = relationships, the wallet = wealth). Have them create a priority list by identifying each object with the numbers 1–7, using the number 1 for the area of life in which they invest the most time, money, energy, or other resource. Encourage members to be realistic in assigning these values. Call for group reports. (A copy of the assignment is available in “Teaching Resource Items” for this study at www.baptistwaypress.org.)
3. Explain that each item represents earthly treasures, and that the time, energy, and money we invest in each reflects the way we “store” them in this life. Tell the class that this lesson will help us consider the relative values we routinely assign to these treasures.

Guide Bible Study

4. Enlist someone to read Matthew 6:19–21. Ask: *In what way was the exercise with the objects a “treasure hunt” that helped you see into your heart?*
5. Ask whether anyone has ever suffered a loss of personal property due to theft or other circumstance (fire, natural disaster, etc.), and would be willing to share a brief personal testimony about the experience. Encourage the member(s) to keep the story brief and to focus on his or her response to the event. (As an alternative, call attention to the frequent television interviews with victims of major

disasters who often speak about being grateful to have their lives spared.)

6. Invite someone to read Matthew 6:22–24 while the class listens for the two illustrations Jesus used. Remind the class that Jesus used the eye as a symbol of the condition of one’s heart in considering the relative value of material goods. Briefly summarize the story of Joseph interpreting Pharaoh’s dream about the coming drought and his plan to build barns to store the grain (Genesis 41:25–41). Contrast that story with Jesus’ parable about the rich man who had a great crop and also decided to build more barns (Luke 12:16–21). Ask:
 - (1) What is the difference between those two events?
 - (2) In what ways did Joseph demonstrate that God was his master, and not the grain?
 - (3) How did the rich ruler prove the opposite point?
7. Have someone read Matthew 6:25–32 while the class listens for what these verses say about worry. After the reading, point to the bread and coat hanger on the display table. Call for a volunteer to describe how or why concerns about these items create anxiety or worry for some. Ask: *What do those anxieties suggest to us about the person(s) we most want to please?* Note Jesus’ use of the splendor of God’s creation as a contrast to our concerns.
8. Read Matthew 6:31–32 again, and note that Jesus equates the unhealthy concern about material things to a pagan lifestyle. Ask: *What is God’s prescription for avoiding anxiety and maintaining a healthy perspective on material goods?*
9. Call for a participant to read Matthew 6:33–34. On the board, draw a horizontal line, and identify the beginning as “birth” and the end as “death.” Extend the line through the “death” point, and label it above the line as “Eternal Life.” Ask members to look at the objects on the display table and to identify places along the line that each item might represent (for example, the wallet may be the time when a person got his first job). Ask: *If this line represents the race of your life, what does it say about the “ultimate objective”?*

10. Remind members that in a 200-meter race, the prize does not go to the person who gets to the 100-meter mark first. Ask: *In what ways does the pursuit of material things as the ultimate goal relate to this race analogy?*

Encourage Application

11. Tell members that Jesus' teaching in these verses may be among the most direct, easy-to-understand language that he ever spoke and that the problem for most believers is not in understanding what he said, but in doing what he asks.
12. Refer members to the last paragraph under "To Serve or to Be Served" in the *Study Guide*, which provide statistics about the plight of hungry children. Lead members to suggest some ways they could change spending habits in the areas represented by the objects on the display table and begin to give in order to make a difference in these statistics, either as individuals, a class, or a church.

Teaching Plan—Lecture and Discussion

Connect with Life

1. Prepare a small poster to simulate a newspaper with the following headline: "BLACK TUESDAY: Wall Street Crashes, October 29, 1929." Display the poster, and ask members to react, either with personal stories or comments from history classes. Ask: *What are some similar stories from the last few years?*
2. Note how greed has played a large role in the failure of companies like Enron and in the Bernie Madoff scandal. Offer the following definition of greed: "excessive desire for getting or having, esp. wealth; desire for having more than one needs. . . ." ³ Tell members that this lesson will examine Jesus' words about material things and challenge us to re-think our pursuit of them.

Guide Bible Study

3. Enlist a member to read Matthew 6:19–24. Lead members to identify some valuable “things” in their lives (including material items, relationships, and ideas), and write each on the board. Ask: *How do we demonstrate that these “treasures” are valuable to us? What are the modern “moths and rust” that threaten our treasures?*
4. In the *Study Guide* in the second paragraph under the heading, “To Serve or to Be Served (6:19–24),” the writer reminds us that how we look at these treasures is related to the spiritual quality of our eyes. Invite a volunteer to read Genesis 3:1–6. Ask: *What was it about the fruit that made it tempting? How does this temptation story relate to Jesus’ statement about the eye as the lamp of the soul?*
5. Lead members to comment on how examples of the “treasures” written on the board represent items that *we own* or that may *own us*.
6. Have someone read Matthew 6:25–32 from the printed Scripture in the *Study Guide*. Ask participants to listen for one thing we are not to do (worry). Ask for synonyms for the word “worry,” and write them on the board as participants name them (anxiety, uneasiness, apprehension, concern, dread, fear, etc.). Ask: *How is “worry” related to “trust”?* Invite a volunteer to read Matthew 6:28–30.
7. Read Matthew 6:33–34. Retell the story in paragraph two under the heading “To Seek First or to Seek Last (6:33–34)” in the *Study Guide* about the tourists seeking only souvenirs. Ask: *In what ways does this story describe many believers today?*

Encourage Application

8. Ask members to tell you the items they would grab from their homes if they were told a wildfire was about to consume it. Tell members that the urgency with which they choose from among the many objects of value will reveal the priorities in their lives. Encourage them to prepare a list during the coming week of the things they value the most, starting with their relationship with Christ.

NOTES

1. Jacques Ellul, *Money & Power*. Trans. LaVonne Neff (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1984), 76.
2. Music and lyrics by Bobby McFerrin, 1988.
3. *Webster's New World Dictionary*.