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Studies In The Gospel of Matthew: A Primer for Discipleship

Lesson Seven
Trust God and Stop Worrying About Things

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?

Quick Read
When our Father is our King, we can trust our needs to his grace.

Commentary
Dr. Bill Hinson was the longtime pastor of First United Methodist Church in Houston. His father came to faith late in his life, primarily through Bill’s influence. The day Bill’s father had his fatal heart attack, Bill was away taking his college finals. His family called, and he came immediately, wrecking his car in his haste, but he didn’t arrive in time to see his father before he died.

His father’s last words, repeated over and over and over, were, “Go get Bill, ask him to hold my hand and help the hurt.” Bill said he was overwhelmed with guilt over being late. He told God he would have given ten years of his life to be able to hold his father’s hand. Finally God began helping him to see that as long as he lived there would be hands to hold and hurt to help.
Matthew 6:19-34. Trust God and Stop Worrying About Things

With this difference: It’s not that we hold our hurting father’s hand. It’s that our heavenly Father holds ours.

Why do you need his healing touch this week?

Store up treasures in heaven (6:19-24)
Greek philosophy made a distinction between the spiritual and the secular, but Jesus did not. God made all that is (Genesis 1:1) and called it “very good” (Gen. 1:31). As a father cares for every dimension of his children’s lives, so our Father has a “good, pleasing, and perfect will” for everything we experience (Romans 12:2).

That will extends to our possessions. Contrary to popular characterizations today, Jesus’ disciples were people of means. Peter’s home in Capernaum was the largest yet discovered there, and was situated closest to the Sea of Galilee. He and Andrew formed a fishing enterprise with James and John (Luke 5:10) that included hired servants (Mark 1:20). Matthew was a tax-collector, a despised but very lucrative occupation. The other apostles were financially able to leave their work for months or even years.

But few people have enough money not to want more. And few are so well off that they don’t worry about their financial future. So Jesus addressed this issue headlong: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal” (Matthew 6:19). Let’s examine his words and their meaning in our lives today.

Guard your heart
“Do not store up” could be translated, Stop storing up. “Store up” translates thesaurizete, meaning to treasure, gather, save, lay up. “Treasures” translates thesaurous, meaning repository, storeroom, treasure book. “Rust” translates brosis, meaning that which eats or consumes. “Destroy” translates aphanizei, meaning to ruin, perish, disappear, make ugly. “Thieves” translates kleptai, from which we get kleptomaniac. “Break in” translates dioryssousin, meaning to break in.

Here Jesus referred to the three ways wealth was stored in his culture. Some invested in clothes. Since styles did not often change, garments could be kept and worn for many years. Expensive fabrics such as purple clothing were a very public sign of one’s financial success. However, moths could do what styles and thieves could not. An expensive garment stored through the winter could be ruined by springtime, no matter what steps were taken in the first-century world to protect it.

Others invested in grain and other nonperishable foods. As drought and famine were constant threats, wealthy people built large cisterns in which to store food. (For instance,
Solomon’s grain storage facility at Megiddo was massive.) But rats and mould could “destroy” grain despite all efforts to protect against them.

Still others measured wealth by money. Most people had no access to banks or other means of storing their funds, and so they buried them inside their homes. Since commoners brought their animals inside at night, they buried their money boxes near the walls of their homes where they would not be trampled. However, most coins were susceptible to rust and thieves. Walls were typically made of thin adobe. If a thief knew where to look, he could put his fist through the wall and steal what he found. In this way, “thieves break in and steal.”

James chastised the wealthy of his day: “Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire” (James 5:2-3). Such was the outcome of earthly goods, especially when they were chosen above heavenly priorities.

Jesus did not mean that financial means are inherently sinful. Paul assured us that God “richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment” (1 Timothy 6:17). At issue was not what his disciples had, but why they had it.

Scripture consistently warns us against the sin of coveting more than we should own:

- “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor” (Exodus 20:17).
- “Turn my heart toward your statutes and not toward selfish gain. Turn my eyes away from worthless things; preserve my life according to your word” (Psalm 119:36-37).
- “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (Luke 12:15).
- “Of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a man is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God” (Ephesians 5:5).
- “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry” (Colossians 3:5).

Our Lord did not warn us against possessing money, but against allowing money to possess us: “But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal” (Matt. 6:20). “Store up” translates thesaurizō, which is a present tense imperative. The statement can be translated as continually seek to store up treasures in heaven with God. In his perfect paradise there are no moths to destroy, no rust to corrupt, no rats to consume, no thieves to steal.
We can see why such priorities are important in eternity. However, they are also critical in the present: “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:21). The “heart” was seen as the seat of emotions, intellect, and will. We value most what we invest with our greatest treasure of time, talent, and possessions. Politicians know that if they receive our financial support they have our vote. Where we put our energy and resources reveals what matters most to us.

Guard your mind
Jesus continued: “The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light” (6:22). The Greek words are straight-forward, even if their meaning requires interpretive clarity today. “Eye” translates ophthalmos, from which we get ophthalmology. “Lamp” translates lynchnos, the common light source for homes in Jesus’ culture. “Body” translates somatos, referring to the physical body. “Good” translates haplous, meaning to be single, without guile, sincere, healthy, or generous. “Full of light” translates photoion, meaning shining, bright, full of light.

The ancients saw the eye as emitting light from the soul. When sculptors portrayed a living subject, they included details of the eye; when their subject was deceased, the eye was blank. If the soul is “good”—sincere and generous—the whole body would be filled with “light,” that which is good and godly.

However, “if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!” (6: 23). “Bad” translates poneros, meaning evil, wicked, worthless, or stingy. “Darkness” translates skoteinos, a word that was used to describe both physical and spiritual darkness. Darkness of the eyes produces sorrow (Lamentations 5:17). It expresses captivity (Psalm 107:10, 14). The realm of the dead is one of darkness (Ps. 88:6; Job 17:12-13; Matt. 8:12).

If the soul is stingy and covetous, the entire life will be “full of darkness” that consumes the personality and actions. Solomon observed that “a man with an evil eye hastens after wealth and does not know that want will come upon him” (Proverbs 28:22, NASB). His spiritual “eye” was “dark” and blind, so that he could not see where he was going and would inevitably fall into ruin.

Jesus’ point is clear: if our thoughts are ungodly, our lives will follow suit. If our thoughts are gracious, generous, and Spirit-led, our lives will produce the fruit of the Spirit. Marcus Aurelius, the Roman emperor and Stoic philosopher, was right: the happiness of your life depends on the quality of your thoughts.

Guard your will
From money and mind, Jesus turned to our will: “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 Money” (Matt. 6:24). “No one” translates oudeis, meaning nothing, nobody; it describes a categorical fact without exceptions. “Can” translates dynamai, meaning to be capable, able. “Serve” translates douleuo, meaning to be a slave.

No one has the ability to be the slave of two “masters” (kyrios, lord, owner). This was a logical fact—since a slave belonged to his master every moment of every day, two people could not own the same slave. You and I cannot drive the same car at the same time.

Rather, we will “hate” (miseo, meaning to disfavor, disregard, detest) the one and “love” (agapao, meaning to give unconditional commitment to) the other. Or we will be “devoted” (antecho, meaning to cling to, hold fast to) the first and “despise” (kataphroneo, meaning to feel contempt for, to devalue) the other.

The bottom line is the bottom line: “You cannot serve both God and Money.” “Money” translates mamona, an Aramaic term referring to worldly wealth. The NIV capitalizes the word to emphasize its status as a rival to God.

Paul echoed Jesus’ warning:

Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs (1 Timothy 6:6-10).

There are only two choices: either we serve God as our King or our hobby. He is either Lord of all, or he is not truly Lord at all. Because we are fallen people living in a fallen world, our default position is to exalt and serve ourselves. If you have not consciously and intentionally submitted your resources, thoughts, and decisions to Christ today, he is not their King—you are.

You will never give your class members a greater gift than to help them serve God as their King, in his power, for his glory.

Do not worry about treasures on earth (6:25-34)
Jesus has taught us to serve heaven’s priorities with what we have, think, and do. Now he shows us how to relate to the fallen world in which we seek to serve our King: “Therefore 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 important than food, and the body more important than clothes?” (Matt. 6:25).

This was not the only time Jesus warned us about worry. In his parable of the sower he said, “The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful” (13:22). To the rich young ruler he said, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me” (19:21). Tragically, “When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth” (19:22).

In our text, “I tell you” demonstrates the divine authority with which Jesus taught. The rabbis of his day cited the authorities of their scribal traditions, but Jesus spoke directly from the Father. At the end of his sermon, “the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law” (7:28-29).

“Worry” translates merimnao, meaning to have anxiety, care for, be concerned about, to divide the mind. James warned us that “a double-minded man” is “unstable in all he does” (James 1:8). “Is not life more important than food” (Matt. 6:25) could be rendered, Is there not more to life than what you eat?

Jesus’ warning is a present-tense imperative, literally, Stop worrying about your life. Are you worried about some problem you’re facing today, perhaps with finances, health, family, or other relationships? Jesus says to stop it, now.

Why? For two reasons. The first is logical: if God provides for his creation, won’t he provide for his children? As Jesus taught on this beautiful hillside, undoubtedly there were birds flying nearby to which he pointed as he spoke his next words: “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?” (6:26). They are busy finding food for the present, but they do not worry about keeping it for the future.

“Valuable” translates diaphero, meaning to be worth more, superior to. Here we find another example of from the lesser to the greater, a common teaching technique in Jesus’ day. If God would provide for birds, how much more will he provide for his children? By analogy, if a father would feed the family pets, wouldn’t he provide for his sons and daughters?

The second is practical: what good has worrying done for you? “Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?” Jesus asked (6:27). “Single hour” translates heis pechys, literally one cubit. It can refer to physical stature or length of life. Has your worrying extended your life or health in any way? Has it done anything constructive? To
the contrary, doesn’t it lead to elevated blood pressure, ulcers, and a host of other physical maladies?

Returning to his first line of argument, Jesus shifted from the birds above his disciples to the lilies of the fields around them: “And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin” (6:28). “See how” translates katamanthano, meaning to observe well, to learn thoroughly. “Labor” translates kapaio, which does not refer to work but to weariness.

They don’t worry about tomorrow, but “I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these” (6:29). By some estimates, Solomon would be worth $58 billion in today’s currency. But nothing the wealthiest humans can make is as magnificence as nature in her finery.

Then Jesus made his point: “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?” (6:30). Grass was used to start fires for cooking, but it possesses a beauty our wealth cannot match. If God takes such care with such temporary parts of his creation, how will he provide for his eternal children?

In conclusion: “So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’” (6:31). “Do not worry” is literally stop worrying. This is the kind of thing Gentiles do, for they have no heavenly Father to trust: “For the pagans run after all these things” (6: 32a). “Run after” translates epizetousin, meaning to search for, wish, seek after, desire. Could his words be more descriptive of our materialistic, consumer-centered culture?

Don’t ever wonder whether God knows about your problems and needs: “and your heavenly Father knows that you need them” (6:32b). “Knows” translates oida, meaning to understand, be familiar with, comprehend. We do not pray to inform God, but to position ourselves to receive all that his grace intends to give.

Rather than worrying about our needs, we should focus our energies on our Father and his purposes: “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (6:33). “Seek” translates zeteo, meaning to look for, strive for, seek earnestly to obtain. “First” translates protos, meaning in the first place, before all other things. “Righteousness” translates dikaiosyne, meaning justice, fairness with all. As verse 32 made clear, “all these things” refers to the needs of life, not its luxuries. “Will be given” translates prostithemi, meaning to provide, add, grant, give.

We must choose—we can live for God’s Kingdom or our own. We can trust God with our needs or worry about them. Jesus warned us: “Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own”
(6:34). “Trouble” translates kakia, meaning baseness, depravity, vice, wickedness. The word was used to describe a crop damaged by hail. Such problems are inevitable, but our Father’s provision is more than sufficient to our needs.

God continually assures us that he will care for his own. He told Jacob, “I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go. . . . I will not leave you until I have done what I promised you” (Genesis 28:15). He reassured the psalmist that “he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep” (Psalm 121:4). We can respond: “You give me your shield of victory, and your right hand sustains me; you stoop down to make me great” (Ps. 18:35). The Lord promises his people: “I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you” (Isaiah 46:4).

What about tomorrow worries you today?

**Conclusion**

Billy Graham writes:

Physicians tell us that 70 percent of all illnesses are imaginary, the cause being mental distress or worry. In reading hundreds of letters from people with spiritual problems, I am convinced that high on the list is the plague of worry. It has been listed by heart specialists as the number one cause of heart trouble.

Psychiatrists tell us that worry breeds nervous breakdowns and mental disorders. Worry is more adept than Father Time in etching deep lines into the face. It is disastrous to health, robs life of its zest, crowds out constructive, creative thinking, and cripples the soul.

Jesus prescribed the remedy for worry. If as Jesus’ disciples we would live by these words, wouldn’t our witness be strengthened? Wouldn’t others want the joy and tranquility they see in us? Wouldn’t our faith lead to our Father?
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1 Billy Graham, Unto the Hills (Dallas, Texas: Word, 1986), 52.