

Don't Worry
United Church of Broomfield
August 30, 2020

Matthew 6:22-34 (NRSV)

22 “The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; 23 but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

24 “No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

25 “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? 26 Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? 27 And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? 28 And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, 29 yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. 30 But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you— you of little faith? 31 Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ 32 For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33 But strive first for the kingdom of God[d] and his[e] righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

34 “So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.

Contrary to what our initial reaction might be to the harsh and austere tone of Jesus’ opening words, “No one can serve two masters...you cannot serve God and wealth,” it is not a call to gloomy austerity or joyless poverty. As he will do throughout the gospel, Jesus is once again calling us to seek and claim our true selves, and to find our true selves in God. This, it can be said, is the point of his entire ministry. Jesus is compelling us here to lay hold of the fullest possible expression of who we really are and pointing out to us the things that get in the way.

Jesus begins by laying out two possible orientations toward life that will inevitably clash: a life-focus upon *God* and a life-focus upon *Mammon*. *Mammon*, commentators tell us, is an expression common to Jesus’ day that defines something harmless enough in itself. *Mammon* is “simply an Aramaic word for ‘property,’ including, but not limited to, money,”¹ though it is translated as “wealth” in some Bible versions. *Mammon*, back then, was “a way of referring to property and wealth in general.”² There is nothing particularly evil about *Mammon* in and of itself. This urging from Jesus, situated in the midst of the Sermon on the Mount, is not a call to a life of ascetic renunciation.

¹ M. Eugene Boring, “The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections.” *The New Interpreter’s Bible. Vol. VIII. Ed. Leander E. Keck, et al.* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1995), 210

² Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part One: Chapters 1-15.* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press), 64.

- Ascetic Renunciation - giving up all material possessions and physical pleasures, living a meager and frugal life.

Jesus is not telling us to “renounce” anything; he is telling us to take responsibility for the focus and orientation of our lives.

“No one can serve two masters,” Jesus says. Serving two masters here is not the same thing as having two jobs, and it is not the same thing as saying “Choose between career and family” or something like that — though this *could* have *everything* to do with *either* or *both* of these examples.

This is not a call to renounce Mammon or wealth or property. Rather, Jesus is saying that our relationship to wealth must not be likened to a slave serving a master. We must not *love* wealth; we cannot be *devoted* to possessions, because in order to serve mammon, we become affected in such a way that we not only consider but promulgate injustices and hostilities that the Lord “Mammon” requires.

Jesus’ call here is not to *give up* wealth; his call is to *love* God. “Love” and “hate” here do not refer to emotions; the terms as used here by Jesus “represent the biblical idiom for ‘choose’/‘not choose.’³ If we would love God, we must be prepared to despise wealth, which is to say if we would *choose* God, if we must choose life with God, we cannot choose wealth and possessions over God.

So, again it must be emphasized, this is not a call to renounce wealth. It is a call to *love* God — a call to choose to honor and serve God with the same kind of devotion that a slave serves his or her master. The “slave” image can be very unsettling for us, especially in light of the rampant racial injustice prevalent in America today, but Jesus lived in a time when slavery was an established norm.

This is not a call to renounce anything. It is a call to choose whom we will serve. It is a call for us to *love God* — and to understand what loving God entails. The most effective approach to confronting and resolving the dilemma implied here is simply to *choose* to love God. If we choose to love God, we do not have to renounce or relinquish anything. If we give ourselves completely to the love of God, we will come to “hate” and “despise” wealth and possessions — and again, this does not refer to some kind of emotional contempt. If we are totally devoted to loving and serving God, any inordinate attachment we may have to wealth and material things will simply fall away; we will begin to find wealth simply *uninteresting*. “You cannot serve God and wealth,” Jesus says — so don’t! *Serve God*.

Serve God and relinquish, if anything, the *worry* to which enslavement to wealth inevitably leads. We free ourselves from enslavement to wealth, first and foremost, by *not worrying*.

Our world feels like it is in a state of chaos. With COVID affecting every aspect of our lives and continued racial injustice and murders in our country, things are certainly worrisome, to put it mildly. AND, we are in the middle of “political season,” which always escalates and intensifies extreme feelings of fear, anger and distrust. Watch political ads for 10 minutes and one can’t help but feel worried about the future. So, it can feel trite and dismissive to hear a message about, “money is the root of all evil” and “don’t worry, be happy.”

³ Boring, 210.

Jesus is not encouraging us to a life of gloomy, worried renunciation – a life of scarcity. The challenges of this world can AND ARE worrisome. We naturally are concerned with things like food, water, clothing and shelter for ourselves, our loved ones and hopefully one another. To exist in this world **does** require having some possessions. We can't just "give up everything" and live lives like nomadic monks.

"Notice that Jesus is not dismissing our needs or worries; He acknowledges that life requires food and drink and clothing; God knows we need such things. [There are possessions and things that we need]. ...Jesus suggests that we miss the point of life if we are focused *only* on these basic bodily needs. [Only on possessive material things]. Physical survival is necessary, but it is insufficient as a purpose for living. To reduce our human aspiration to survival is to miss our true nature and our higher calling. God doesn't want us to merely survive, but to flourish. So, Jesus presents a radical alternative; 'strive first for the Kingdom of God, for God's righteousness.'

What Jesus is telling us here is that it is **devotion to wealth and material items** - THAT brings us worry, gloom and anxiety. Jesus is not telling us to bend our heads to the ground and go along as if terrified that some temptation or other will jump out and grab us. Look up! Jesus says look at the birds of the air! Look at the lilies of the field! Don't *renounce* the beauty this life has to offer; enjoy it!

A life devoted to loving and serving God is a life devoted to the feeling that we get when we look out over a flowered meadow on a sunny day, breathing in the fresh air. A life devoted to loving God finds itself caught up with the wonder at the birds as they dart back and forth gathering their food and building their nests, at the robins alighting just out of reach, taking little leaps ahead, luring us away from the nests where Lady Robin sits on her young — are these *worried*? Do they *worry* about where their food will come from; do they *worry* about where they will build their nests? No, they just enjoy and give themselves wholeheartedly to the life that God has given them.

This is the orientation to which Jesus calls us — not a life of worried denial, too busy to care about the physical world and physical beauty, but a life that takes in all of the beauties and joys of nature and that accepts the physical hardships, knowing that, somehow, God will provide.

It is the life dedicated to *Mammon* that pulls us as if down a steep, muddy slope toward worry. It is a life dedicated to wealth-as-god that drags us out of the physical world and into a world of abstractions posing as reality — houses and property and money. To such an orientation, there simply *is* nothing else. A life given over to wealth-as-god cannot help but assume that these are all there is.

A life completely oriented toward wealth-as-god quickly finds its identity bound up in accumulated wealth and possessions; and fixated only upon accumulating more and more. "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 unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness." What do you choose to see? Upon what do you focus? The light and goodness in serving God, or the darkness, worry and anxiety in serving mammon?

Don't worry about renouncing wealth and material things, thinking "If I'm going to follow Jesus' teachings then I can't have this or that." It is a given that the more we renounce something, the more power we give it. It's controls us. When we are feeling anxious and worried about the constant material demands of this world (needs: rent, medical, food and wants: iPhones, cars or clothing), we can find refuge in God:

- Jeremiah 31:25: I will satisfy the weary, and all who are faint I will replenish.

- Matthew 11:28: Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.

To be free of worry, anxiety and darkness, turn your heart and your mind and your strength toward God. Stop focusing on politics. Turn off the news and step away from your Facebook account. Focus on that feeling you get on a vacation day, looking out over meadow or forest or the ocean. Fix your heart upon intangibles: love and generosity, laughing with friends and family, losing yourself in honest work and liberating play, living for the wealth that surrounds us and is right in front of us in our relationships - not storing up physical possessions, having them just to have them and then packing them away. Striving first for the kingdom of God entails taking hold of the kingdom that God has already given us, as well as awaiting that future kingdom, when God's will shall be done on earth as in heaven.

But there is starvation in the world, one might say; hunger, famine, floods, earthquakes and natural disasters happen all over the globe. How does God "provide" in the midst of evils like these?

Despite these worldly occurrences, God ultimately provides when we devote ourselves to the love of neighbor that inevitably follows from love of God. When we strive first for the kingdom of God, and God's righteousness, we are moved to provide for people who don't have basic physical needs, and to reach out to those suffering from disaster and injustice.

Really, as counterintuitive as it might seem in our day, we do not come out of the womb as utterly free beings without any particular ties to anything or anyone. We are dependent beings from the beginning — upon parents who brought us to birth, upon family and society that nurture and support us. Our life consists of only one choice, really: Whom will we serve? Jesus breaks that choice down as far as it will go. Whom will we serve? If we would be free, our choice must be God. Don't worry — don't worry about food, don't worry about clothing; don't even worry about what you must relinquish. Choose life with God, and everything else will fall away.

AMEN