



DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

7643 Huron River Drive

Dexter, MI 48130

734-426-8480

GIVING GOD FIRST PLACE

November 9, 2008

Rev. Stephen G. Bringardner

~ Scripture: Matthew 6:25-34 ~

INTRODUCTION

Our Scripture this morning is from a familiar passage of Scripture—Matthew, chapter 6. Jesus is smack in the middle of the *Sermon on the Mount*. . .

²⁵"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? ²⁶Look 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? ²⁷Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?"

²⁸"And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. ²⁹Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ³⁰If 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? ³¹So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' ³²For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.

³³But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

Psychologists tell us that there are 3 major “wants” in life:

- 1) Comfort == to want food when we are hungry, water when thirsty, warmth when cold, shelter when it storms. We want to be comfortable.
- 2) Acceptance by Peers == to be respected for who we are, what we do, what we accomplish.
- 3) Meaning in Life == to understand what life is all about, what part we have to play in it.

Jesus addressed all of these “wants” in the Sermon on the Mount. He said, “*I know you are concerned about comfort. I know you are concerned about what you are to eat and what you are going to drink. Here is my advice to you: Don’t worry about all that!!!*”

And we say, “*Sure, Lord. Easy for you to say, hard for us to do.*”

He says, “*I know that you are also concerned about how you come across to other people—whether they accept you or not. I just want to tell you this: All of your worrying is not going to add one moment to your life. It will not make you any*

more beautiful or handsome or anything else. So just don't worry about that."

We say, *"Sure, Lord. Easy for you, not that easy for us."*

Finally he says, *"You are concerned about where you are going in life, and I just want to tell you this: Life is more than all of these things."*

A lot of people read this Scripture, shake their heads and say: *"The only way we can do what Jesus tells us here is to build a hut on top of some mountain 1000 miles away from civilization, sit around with our arms folded and just think wonderful pious thoughts all day long."*

But no, it's just the OPPOSITE. Jesus is saying that this is the way you are to live in a very busy world where there is corruption. . .this how you deal with all the pressure in a very materialistic society. . .this how you raise your kids in a culture saturated with evil influences.

I don't know about you, but the hardest thing I struggle with is NOT deciding between right & wrong. While I'm certainly not perfect, I can usually figure that out pretty well. What I struggle with is deciding which of the good things I should do. . .what are the right things to focus on. . . how do I properly use my time, my talents, my energies. In the frantic pace of life, I have a hard time setting my priorities and following them. . .a hard time putting **"first things first"**.

Jesus cuts through all that. He tells us what to put first. *"Seek first His kingdom. . .His righteousness."* Don't put 2nd things 1st and 1st things 2nd. Put 1st things 1st and 2nd things 2nd.

So, my thesis is similar to Chuck's last week:

- ❖ Last week re. money: ***"If you trust God, He will provide for you."***
- ❖ Today re. everything else: ***"If you give God first place in every area of your life, the rest will be taken care of."***

A PASSAGE ABOUT WORRY?

Now, you might be wondering, is this passage about WORRY/ANXIETY ~or~ AMBITION?

- In v. 31: Jesus says, *"do not worry"* == that's **anxiety!**
- In v. 33: Jesus says, *"seek first"* == that's **ambition!**

These words seem to be used interchangeably by Jesus, so you could push it in either direction.

Certainly there is much in our world to worry about. Recent weeks have seen economic chaos erupt around the globe. Stock markets have plummeted, then risen only to go back down again. There has been a downturn in profits for many companies. . .a huge credit crunch. . .escalating home foreclosures. We're in terrible economic times! It would be easy to cave in to worry.

I suppose you could look around and conclude there is much to worry about (e.g.: the economy, the well-being of our family, how we're going to make it, etc.). Shouldn't we be concerned? Of course! But, we should take Jesus at His word when He says: Seek first the Kingdom of God + His righteousness—and the rest will be taken care of. *"All these things will be added unto you."*

In **v. 32**, Jesus personalizes this when He says "your heavenly Father knows what you need". Listen, **GOD KNOWS!** Whatever situation in life you are facing right now—God knows what you need! Whether it's concern for a loved one, a financial concern, loss of a job, a health issue, or the threat of dying—He knows what you need.

In our TRUTH PROJECT groups, we've been asking: Do you really believe that what you believe is really real? Do you believe God is who He says He is? What is it you really believe about God? Do you really believe our proposition this morning—that if you put God first in your life, the rest will be taken care of? Or are you living as a “practical atheist”?

By the way, I really liked what I read in *The Arbor Vine* (newsletter of the Ann Arbor District UMC) this week. Tom Macaulay, our District Superintendent, in addressing the churches on the district countered the impulse to “cut back” as our first response to hard times. He said:

“I understand such tendencies, for they're pretty natural, pretty normal. Yet I'd also point out that through the centuries, the Church has been at its best when life's circumstances pose their greatest challenge to us in the Body of Christ.” Our response can be “*counter-intuitive*” as we reach out “in new and creative ways with a word of hope. . .and financial resources to help others even closer to ‘the edge’ than you and I.” He challenged us to study the Scriptures for a “new way of looking at things in a time that feels threatening and more than a bit overwhelming.”

A PASSAGE ABOUT AMBITION!

All of that said, I believe this passage is more about AMBITION than ANXIETY! Jesus seems to be saying there's something higher than material necessities we should be seeking. It's not material things we should chase after, but spiritual values. It's not our own good and comfort, but what pleases God. Not even food & clothing—“the basics”—are as important as the Kingdom & Righteousness of God.

The passage asks, “*What is really important to you?*” People. Objects. Goals. All compete for top priority. Most or all are legitimate (recall my dilemma). But any of these can move God out of first place—unless you intentionally and actively choose to give Him first place in every area of your life.

Still, don't we have to eat. . .work. . .provide for our families. . .plan ahead? It almost sounds like this passage is pushing us toward becoming irresponsible. No, the words “*Take no thought about tomorrow*” are not intended to say “don't make plans”.

Jesus didn't say, “*Don't plan.*” He said, “*Don't worry.*” There's a difference. Planning for tomorrow is time well-spent; worrying about tomorrow is time wasted! Worrying is related to fear—which gets in the way of trusting God. Thinking ahead, setting goals, figuring out steps—that's good (and actually alleviates worry).

Alright, so what does it mean to seek God's Kingdom? And His Righteousness?

I. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO SEEK GOD'S KINGDOM?

It means we seek His rule over our lives. It begins when you humble yourself, repent, believe, born again. To seek first His Kingdom is to bring every aspect of your life—including your home, marriage, family, personal morality, professional life, business ethics, bank balance, tax returns, and life-style under His Lordship.

“Jesus is Lord” was the creed of the early Christians. And it should be our creed as well. Jesus Christ is “King of kings and Lord of lords”. That's more than a grandiose statement that stretches out to embrace the whole world (i.e.: everyone in general, no one in particular). It pertains first and foremost to our individual lives. Does He rule in your life this morning? Is He Lord of your life? Your affections? Your plans & goals? Is it your ambition to seek first His kingdom? His will? His glory? Seeking God first means to seek to glorify Him in everything.

II. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO SEEK GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS?

This almost sounds like the same thing. For if God rules in our lives, then righteousness will be the

natural by-product, since righteousness is one of the chief attributes of God. *Righteousness* depicts God's character. It's His innocence, integrity (truth & authenticity), equity & justice.

Seek His Kingdom = to go after salvation, to be born again / to acknowledge Jesus Christ as Savior + Lord;

Seek His Righteous = to go after His holiness / purity (i.e.: to have the very character of God reproduced in us).

Because He is a righteous God, a holy God—He desires the same in us. We are to be done with injustice and cruelty. He desires truth in the inward being. He wants us to love the things He loves and hate the things He hates (e.g.: sin, and the things of our earthly (sinful) nature).

What does that include? There's a list in **Colossians 3**:

- Sexual immorality, lust, evil desires & greed;
- Anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy language;
- Lying to each other.

That's the negative. . . what we are to "put off". What are we to "put on"? Read **vv. 12-17**. . .

¹²Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. ¹³Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. ¹⁴And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

¹⁵Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. ¹⁶Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. ¹⁷And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

That's what it means to live righteously. It's much more than living a "decent life". It's totally impossible unless you've been born again and filled with the Holy Spirit. . . unless you have inaugurated Him "King of kings and Lord of lords" in your life.

We are to live a cut above the rest of the world. When we do, people will take notice. If it's genuine they will either respect you or persecute you.

APPLICATION

The question this morning is: WHAT IS YOUR AMBITION?

Everybody is ambitious to be or do something.

- It starts in the early years: To be a cowboy, an astronaut, a ballerina.
- For me: I wanted to become an elevator operator or a bus driver. ☺
- For adults: It's to be wealthy, famous, powerful.

Ultimately, there are only *two possible ambitions* for human beings. Jesus contrasted them in our passage:

- One is focused on the "material"- -one is focused on the "spiritual".
- One goes after "treasures on earth"- -one goes after "treasures in heaven".
- One is more concerned with food & clothing- -one is more concerned with the kingdom & righteousness of God.

Bottom line, we are either going to be self-centered or God-centered. You will either be ambitious for yourself or for God. There is no 3rd alternative.

Ambitions for SELF may be modest or grandiose. That is, we may live simply, concerned to have just enough to eat, drink, and wear. We may be environmentally conscientious. Or, we may go after a bigger house, a faster car, a higher salary, a wider reputation, more power. Either way, these are ambitions for myself (i.e.: *my* comfort, *my* wealth, *my* status, *my* well-being).

Ambitions for GOD, on the other hand, can never be modest. There is something inherently inappropriate about cherishing small ambitions for God. It's like giving the king leftovers. How can we ever be content to hide our light under a bushel—so that little or no honor goes to His name? NO! Once we are clear that He is King, we long to see Him crowned with glory and honor. We seek to magnify Him in every area of our life. . .to reflect God and glorify Him. That is our purpose in life, the very reason for our existence. That is why he placed us here on earth.

Now here's the **Good News!** When this is genuinely our dominant ambition, then not only will "*all these things* (i.e.: our material needs) *be provided*", but there will be no harm in having secondary ambitions. Not if they are subservient to our primary ambition and not in competition with it.

Here's the thing. If we put first things first (i.e.: His Kingdom & Righteousness), then the secondary ambitions become healthy—because they are in their rightful place. There's no guilt in pursuing good food, nice clothing, an education, a good-paying job, a fulfilling career, a business opportunity—WHEN we have our priorities straight.

As a Christian, you should be eager to develop your gifts, widen your opportunities, extend your influence, get that promotion—not to boost your own ego or build your own empire, but rather through everything (and in every way) to bring glory to God.

Lesser ambitions are safe and right if they are not an end in themselves, but the means to a greater end (i.e. to live out God's kingly rule in our lives, to live out of a pure & righteous heart; and to spread His Kingdom and righteousness all over the place). That's what brings glory to God. This is the "Supreme Good" which we are to *seek first*. There is no other!

Study Guide

Monday: Re-read Matthew 6:25-34. How was Jesus trying to change our focus here? What are we seeking when we seek "*his kingdom*"? What are we seeking when we seek "*his righteousness*"?

Tuesday: Read Proverbs 3:5-6. Why is it so hard to give up our own understanding of how serious a situation is, and what the solution might be?

Wednesday: Read Psalm 34:17-19. How have you experienced the truth of this?

Thursday: Read II Corinthians 4:16-18. What are the things which are seen? What are the things which are unseen?

Friday: Read Hebrews 11:36-40. What is your reaction to these verses?