

‘SEEK FIRST’ MATTHEW 6:19-34

[St Mark’s Northbridge, All Services, Sunday March 7, 2021]

1. Our Hearts: Where Desires Grow.

As Pat helpfully pointed out last Sunday, chapter 6 of Matthew’s gospel is all about desire. Verses 1-18 were all about the desire for recognition. You might remember the story Pat told last Sunday about successfully making a jump off a kitchen chopping board to the beaming acclaim of his family. And you might remember thinking privately, as I did, that you could have probably bettered his feat by jumping from a height of two or three chopping boards. We all crave recognition don’t we? And in the first half of our chapter Jesus taught us to long instead for the blessings our Heavenly Father gives to his children.

And if the first half of chapter 6 was about the desire for recognition, I guess we could summarise the second half of the chapter by saying it’s about the desire for things- for food, for drink, for clothes, and for the money to buy these things¹. And here Jesus doesn’t so much want to talk us out of desiring these things. Rather, he wants to train our hearts to desire his kingdom more deeply. And so, once again, today’s section asks us to examine our hearts. Our hearts are where our desires grow.

But by now this ought not surprise us. In many ways, this has been the intent of Jesus’ whole Sermon on the Mount. Right from the outset we’ve been asked to consider not just our visible behaviour but also our inner thoughts. We’ve been invited to consider our motivations, our ambitions, our loves. Jesus has been searching us and reminding us that life in his kingdom is a life turned away from pleasing from ourselves and turned towards him and towards the needs of others. From beginning to end, this sermon Jesus preached is an examination of our hearts. It was right back in 5:8 that Jesus said: ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.’ And since then, Jesus has been showing us what that means.

2. Our Choices: Directions The Heart May Go.

And in the section we’re considering today/tonight, I would say that Jesus puts before us four kinds of choices. They’re all related of course. In fact, it would be more accurate to say that Jesus gives us four different perspectives on a single choice. Jesus is really asking us one central question, but he asks it in four different ways. So I want to just take you through them now one at a time so you can see how the picture builds. And as you do, I hope we’ll feel together the weight of what Jesus is asking us. Here are a

¹ Michael Green suggests that Jesus is tackling worldliness in chapter 6- in both its religious (6:1-18) and secular (6:19-34) forms- *The Message of Matthew*, p. 102.

series choices for us to make- choices between two different ways of life. Here are four different ways we can think about the directions our hearts may choose to go.

- treasure: earth or heaven

And the first of them is about treasure. And it's the choice between treasure on earth and treasure in heaven. Verse 19.

[Read 6:19-21]

Treasure speaks to what we most value. It speaks to what we're investing in. And Jesus says we can invest in the treasures of earth- things like food and drink and clothes, money, real estate, cars, technology, toys- both the kiddie kind and the adult kind; or we can invest in the treasures of heaven- the salvation of people's souls, our growing holiness, the pleasure and recognition of our heavenly Father, our participation in his worship. And the key difference, says Jesus, relates to how long these investments will last. Those earthly treasures don't last. Moths and rats eat away at them. Robbers steal them. Bank balances dwindle. Houses get too old and are bulldozed. When it comes to cars, from the day you buy one its value begins to drop and its condition begins to deteriorate. Technology is always superseded, or it ceases to work the way we want it to. Toys break, or we get bored of them. And we all know what happens to the food and drink we consume. Earthly treasures don't last.

But, by contrast, heavenly treasures do. Forever. We will share eternity with all who turn to Christ. Godliness, as Paul says, holds promise not just for the present life but for the life to come². The glow of the praise we receive from the Father on the judgement day will never leave us. And the praises we offer to him will never cease to be sung.

So Jesus asks us whether we want to make a short term investment with a terrible return? Or whether we'd rather make a long-term investment, and I mean long-term, which never stops paying off? And he reminds us of the importance of this choice because what we treasure is what our hearts love. And every day we live on this earth, our hearts will be led by our desires. If our desires are good, we will be the pure in heart. If our desires are foolish, then we will live foolish lives.

- eyes: healthy or unhealthy

But then Jesus has a second way of asking his question. And this time it's a question about our eyes. Verse 22.

[Read 6:22-23]³.

² 1 Timothy 4:8

³ We've already heard Jesus talk about how his disciples are like a lamp that gives light to the world (Matthew 5:15). Now he uses the lamp metaphor a little differently.

Jesus says that our eyes are like a lamp that gives light to our whole body. And they can either let in light, or darkness- depending on what we look at. It's true isn't it? Some of the things we look at are beautiful and life-giving and they fill us with light. But some of the things we look at only lead us into the dark.

And if we were to translate Jesus' question here into our modern vernacular, I reckon he might be asking it like this. What have you got your eye on? Have you got your eye on the next i-phone or apple watch? Have you got your eye on your exam marks at the end of the year? Have you got your eye on a new car? Or a promotion at work? Or have you got your eye on someone else's husband or wife? Have you got your eye on retirement and how you're going to spend it? Have you got your eye on some internet or television content that only fills you with darkness?

Or alternatively, have you got your eye on the needs of your neighbours? Have you got your eye on someone at church who you want to encourage? Have you got your eye on the people you love and pray for who don't yet follow Jesus? Have you got your eye on yourself in those areas where you know you need to grow and change? Have you got your eye on the work God is doing all over the world because you want to thank him for it and play your part in it?

You get the idea. What have you got your eye on?

- master: God or money

But then thirdly, Jesus frames the choice we face as a choice about who our master is, who we serve. Verse 24.

[Read 6:24]

It's true isn't it? You can have two friends. You can have two employers. You can have two influences. But you can't have two masters. There can't be two people to whom you belong, two people or things to whom you owe your highest allegiance. It just can't be done. You can perhaps try it? But in the end, as Jesus says, one of them will have your heart, and the other will have your resentment.

And at this point Jesus is saying something about the impossibility of what some of us are prone to attempt! I'm talking about when we try to invest in both the treasures of earth and heaven at the same time, when our eyes are on both light and darkness at the same time, and when we try to serve both God and money. Jesus' isn't just saying this is a bad idea. He's saying it can't ultimately be done! And he's warning us about the grave danger of trying. Because he doesn't think the risk here is simply confusion of purpose, or mixed motives, or divided loyalties. He thinks the risk here is that you'll end up resenting God. You'll end up hating him. And sadly, I can testify that I've seen this happen. The danger Jesus speaks of is all too real.

You can follow Jesus and have money. You can follow Jesus and use money. You can even follow Jesus and enjoy your money and what it buys. But you can't follow Jesus and love money. You can't follow Jesus and be devoted to wealth. You can't. And if you try you might end up despising God- the God who has given you everything you possess? This is Jesus' grave warning here.

- pursuit: 'all these things' or 'his kingdom and righteousness'

And then, fourthly, Jesus says the choice our hearts face is a choice about what we pursue. We can choose to pursue all the treasures of earth, we can pursue the things that make us dark inside, we can pursue money, food, drink, clothes etc. This is what Jesus refers to in verse 32 when he talks about the pagans running after 'all these things'.

Or, alternatively, we can pursue the treasures of heaven, all that gives light, God himself. As verse 33 says: 'his kingdom and his righteousness.' To seek God's kingdom of course is to pursue God's rule, his purposes, his work in the world. And to seek God's righteousness is to seek to be perfect as our heavenly father is perfect⁴.

And I say this is a matter of 'pursuit' because that's the language we find in verses 32-33. When Jesus says in verse 32 that the pagans 'run after' all these things, that's what they're doing. They're pursuing them. And pagans running after the earth's treasures is an incredibly apt way of describing the world isn't it? Is that not exactly what we see all around us? People racing around trying to earn money, trying to enhance their reputation, trying to make sure their kids squeeze in as many extra-curricular activities as possible so they don't miss out, trying to provide a comfortable home and a secure financial future for themselves or those they love, trying to get to the "right" shops to buy the "right" things. The citizens of Sydney are well described by this phrase are they not? They are running after all these things⁵.

And the other way Jesus describes this way of life is also striking. He says it's a life of worry. They're worried about their life- verse 25- what they will eat or drink, about their bodies, what they will wear. And is not that verse too an incredibly apt description of our neighbours in this city? When you run after all these things you do become anxious. Anxious about whether you'll have enough, anxious that you might miss out, anxious about what people think of you, anxious about your health, anxious about the future, and on and on. And this is why Jesus is so strong in these verses about not worrying. Because he doesn't want his people to be like this. He doesn't want them to join in with this anxious race which the pagans are engaged in. He wants us to be peculiar. He wants our vision of the good life to be entirely shaped by the values of his kingdom. So he pleads with us here not to worry like they do. And he says that over and over again in verses 25-34.

⁴ 5:48

⁵ It's an almost comical description I think, or at least it would be if it weren't so tragic.

Of course, Jesus doesn't mean we should never worry about anything. And he's certainly not having a go at those for whom anxiety is an unwanted and persistent condition. Jesus doesn't mean we shouldn't care about providing for our families, or that there's no place for those godly anxieties which reflect genuine care for those we love. Those things are not Jesus' concern here. Rather, his target here is the kind of worldly worry that's the constant companion of those who run after treasures on earth⁶.

And, of course, at the heart of why Jesus says his people don't need to worry is because they have a father in heaven who knows their every need. And I want to come back to that in a few minutes. But before we move on from this point, I want to show you that Jesus throws in for good measure a couple of other reasons not to worry too. And both of these reasons act like wise proverbs to strengthen his point. And the first of these is in verse 27.

[Read 6:27]

Jesus' blunt point here is that each one of us have a day of death fixed by God. And you can run after the things of the world all you like and you can worry about them to the max, but none of that can give you even an extra hour.

And the second of Jesus' proverbial sayings is in verse 34.

[Read 6:34]

Jesus' point here is that the world we live in is a trouble factory. Tomorrow will have new challenges, unexpected trials, and fresh reasons to worry. So there's little wisdom in getting ahead of yourself. Just deal with today, today. Worry about tomorrow, tomorrow.

And with these two proverbial sayings Jesus adds something. According to Jesus, worry is not only unnecessary, but it's also useless⁷.

And that's why Jesus urges us here to run after something else. And you notice that is what he's saying. The point isn't that we should just give up our worldly preoccupations. Rather, Jesus says, we should replace them with better ones⁸. The pagans run after 'all these things' in verse 32, but the disciples of Jesus in verse 33 'seek' his kingdom and his righteousness. Running after and seeking are really the same thing here⁹. They're

⁶ I appreciate the suggestion of J C Ryle here that Christians should worry like they grieve. Jesus is not so much asking Christians never to worry or never to grieve, but to grieve and worry with hope (see 1 Thessalonians 4:13)- *Matthew*, p. 46

⁷ See Michael Green's commentary- p.104.

⁸ See Don Caron's commentary- p.181.

⁹ The two words in the Greek actually come from the same verbal root.

words about what we pursue. And Jesus isn't saying that his disciples ought not be pursuers. He's saying that we should be pursuers of the right things, the best things.

Jesus' invitation here is to trade in our small desires for bigger ones, to trade in our shallow ambitions for deeper ones, and to train our hearts to long for the treasure that lasts- the kingdom of God, and the righteousness of God. And I hope you'll hear his words today as exactly that- an invitation. Because Jesus isn't here just to point out how dumb we can sometimes be. Rather, he wants to coax us into seeing how much better and more beautiful are the blessings the Father offers us.

But having said that, we do do well to stop and admit to ourselves that that we can sometimes be really dumb. Sometimes we are foolishly like the pagans. Because these temptations are subtle. And we hear the people around us all the time implicitly inviting us to be more like them! And sometime we give in to these temptations. And so the worldly worry Jesus describes here can be found in our churches. And perhaps it's even more deadly than other more obvious sins. As the 19th century preacher J C Ryle colourfully said about these verses (with 1 Samuel 18 in the back of his mind): 'open transgression slays its thousands, but worldliness its tens of thousands'¹⁰.

{But in his kindness, even within the words of this Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches us how to notice the signs that our hearts may've drifted. And I remind you of these things now so you can perform your own self diagnosis, even now as you sit here. [Slow] Have we been neglectful in prayer such that we're racing so much we're not stopping to spend time with God? Or have our prayers become filled with requests for health, and less stress, and getting through school work, and meeting the next deadline, rather than leaving room for the sorts of prayers Jesus commends to us in the Lord's Prayer? Could it be true to say that most of our thoughts are about the things of the earth, and very few of our thoughts are about heaven? Is it possible we aren't really relying on our Heavenly Father to provide all we need, but instead we're wearing ourselves out like it all depends on us? And would someone looking on say our lives are filled with the pursuit of Christ's work in the world and with the imitation of Christ's perfection? Or would they say that honestly what we chase is not very distinguishable from the pursuits of our neighbours?

They're just a few questions that I think Jesus himself suggests to us. And though it may be uncomfortable for us to do so, asking ourselves those diagnostic questions will serve us well. And as we take that kind of brave inventory of our treasures, our eyes, our master, and our pursuit, we will find Jesus, as I said before, not berating us but coaxing us into the better, more beautiful, and more lasting things that he longs for us to be devoted to.}

3. Our God: The One Whose Kingdom We Inhabit.

¹⁰ J C Ryle, *Matthew*, p.44.

Well, they're the four different ways in which Jesus asks our hearts, this morning/evening, what we will choose. But before we finish today/tonight, we need to take just a couple of minutes to make sure we see the most important thing this passage says. And this is not about our hearts, or our choices, but about our God.

{But as we turn our minds to that I want to first tell you a story. Imagine with me a young woman who's just finished school. She has an entrepreneurial spirit. She's got a clear idea for a new business that she thinks will make money. She's ambitious to make it work. She chooses not to go to University but to work on her business plan instead. She doesn't have a lot of money, apart from a little bit she's saved up from part-time jobs during high school. But she's determined to give it a go. And in the years that follow she demonstrates great commitment to fulfil her ambition. Whilst all her friends from school are filling their time with chasing boys, and working towards their university degrees, and buying their first cars, and spending money on drinks at the bar on Friday night and Saturday shopping sprees with the girls, she's pouring all her time and money into her new business. And in the end she reaps the reward. The business takes off. Now what was the secret to her success? If you asked her that question she wouldn't tell you it was her hard work, or her single-mindedness, or her ambitious determination, or her creativity. If you asked her she'd look you in the eye and tell you plainly- I couldn't have done it without my family. When she finished her HSC her father sat her down and told her how much he loved her and how excited he was by her commitment to her plan, and he promised to underwrite it. You see her Dad is an extraordinarily wealthy man. And he assured her that for the next few years he would cover every cost she incurred. He promised to have her back, and that she didn't need to worry about a cent. He was going to invest in her ambition whatever it cost. He'd done exactly the same for her older brother a few years before. And her older brother was now a successful business owner who gave her plenty of help and advice and resources along the way too. Family. That was the secret of her success.

Now, that's not a perfect illustration, but I'm using it to capture what it's like with us when it comes to seeking first God's kingdom and his righteousness.} In these verses, Jesus is encouraging us to be ambitious- and to be ambitious for the right things. He encourages us not to run after all those things our friends and neighbours are spending their time and money on, but instead to devote ourselves to serving his kingdom and to pursuing the growth of his character in our lives. But the secret here is not our determination or commitment. The secret is our family. It's God our generous Father who promises to have our back. And it's Jesus our older brother who has walked this way before. Let me finish by showing you what I mean.

- the Father

When Jesus calls on us in verse 25-32 not to worry about our lives, not to run after all the things the pagans are chasing, he encourages us to look to the birds of the air and

the flowers of the field. And he reminds us how our Father¹¹ in heaven feeds and clothes them. With seemingly little effort on their part the birds are always fed, and the flowers are dressed in spectacular beauty. And Jesus' point is that if our Father does this for the birds and the flowers how much more will he do this for you- you who mean so much more to him than any flower or bird? It's a simple but very profound point. So often when we're starting to worry about the kinds of things Jesus tells us not to worry about, it's because we're looking sideways and comparing ourselves to our pagan neighbours and friends. And Jesus says- look sideways by all means, but look past the car in the next driveway to the flowers in the front yard, and look beyond the well-manicured two storey house to the birds that fly above it. Compare yourself to them! And when you do, you'll know you have a Father who has your back. A Father who will underwrite you while you pursue the ambition he himself has encouraged you to pursue.

And Jesus underlines this in verse 32 as well.

[Read 6:32]

He knows what you need. He has infinite wealth to supply what you need. He has the whole world and your life in his hands. And he loves you. He's generous and kind. This is what our Father is like.

And if he is, then we don't need to race around trying to make sure we make ourselves comfortable. If he is, then we don't need to fear that we're going to miss out. If he is, then we don't need to worry about the things others worry about. And if were to fall into that trap of running after what the pagans chase, how trustworthy would our heavenly father appear to them? Again, there's an opportunity here to let our light shine- so that others may glorify our heavenly father. Our contented trust in him, and our pursuit of larger and better things, will show others just what a great Father our Father is. And if he is this kind of Father, then we can rest contentedly in what we have, and what we know he'll provide, and we can give ourselves in every way to his kingdom and his righteousness.

- the Son

But, of course, we don't just have a generous Father who promises to have our back. We also have an older brother who has walked this way before. Our family does not just consist of the perfect Father Jesus describes here. But Jesus himself, the one who speaks these words, is also in our family.

And we know, don't we, that he didn't try to serve both God and money. He sought the heavenly treasure relentlessly. He didn't worry about where his next meal would come from, or his next drink, or what he would wear to his next miracle. In a model way,

¹¹ Note that this is 'our' Father rather than their Father.

Jesus shows us how to live this life. He sought the kingdom of God and the righteousness of God with crystal clarity.

And in the end that led him to his death. And as he hung on the cross, you and I were given the ultimate guarantee that we mean more to God than the flowers and the birds. Jesus didn't die for the flora and fauna. He died for people. People God made and loved. People like us. His body was broken that we might feed on him, the bread of life, forever. His blood was shed that our spiritual thirst might be eternally satisfied. He was stripped naked so we might be clothed in his righteousness¹².

On behalf of our Father, he provided for us. When you come to Jesus you don't miss out, do you? Not ever. You are made rich beyond description. And when his Father is your Father, you will never want for anything of any value.

If you want to store up treasure in heaven, if you want to be full of light, if you want to serve God with all your heart, and if you want to not worry but to pursue the kingdom and his righteousness, then this is the secret. It's the family you belong to. Our Father. And his Son our brother.

[Read 6:31-33]

¹² I owe this insight to Glen Scrivener: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6q-h4pkOXFA>