

Matthew 6:16-24

We are looking at Jesus' Sermon on the Mount which is part of Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom – what it means to live under the rule and blessing of King Jesus.

In Matthew 6 the emphasis is upon true spirituality as opposed to mere formal religion. Jesus is teaching the crowds against the background of the very different teaching and behaviour of the Pharisees – their endless rules and regulations and their hypocritical worship.

Jesus wants his listeners to understand that God does not want to saddle his people with endless and heavy burdens but to give them life – life in all its fullness: life lived in fellowship with God through Christ; life lived in the power of the Spirit rather than by interminable rules; life lived with deep joy and heartfelt thanksgiving.

The section that we are looking at this evening falls into four parts:

Verses 16-18 are concerned with fasting

Verses 19-21 are about true treasure – solid joys and lasting treasure

Verses 22-23 are about our eyes!

Verse 24 poses the question, “Who is the master of your life?”

I want to comment briefly on the first two sections before jumping to the end and working my way back to the beginning

(I was talking about this passage to a friend of mine during the week and my plan to work my way from the end back to the beginning and he told me that he often reads psalms that way. He finds that beginning at the end of a psalm and working back to the beginning often sheds new light on it. I'm not sure about that, but I plan to adopt a similar approach here.)

Fasting: Verses 16-18

As Jesus talks about the matter of fasting, he has his eye upon the Pharisees whose religion so often focussed on outward show – as in the matter of giving (v.2), and in the matter of prayer (v.5). “Do not be like the hypocrites” says Jesus; do not put on an act. The Pharisees are concerned that their religious devotion should be seen and noticed by others, when fasting as in other areas of their religious life.

Fasting was commanded in the Old Testament only for one day a year, in connection with the Day of Atonement. Leviticus 23:26-32, in the Contemporary English Version, reads,

The Lord God said to Moses:

The tenth day of the seventh month is the Great Day of Forgiveness. It is a solemn day of worship; everyone must go without eating to show sorrow for their sins, and sacrifices must be burned. No one is to work on that day—it is the Great Day of Forgiveness, when sacrifices will be offered to me, so that I will forgive your sins. I will destroy anyone who refuses to go without eating. None of my people are ever to do any work on that day—not now or in the future. And I will wipe out those who do! This is a time of complete rest just like the Sabbath, and everyone must go without eating from the evening of the ninth to the evening of the tenth.

It was to be a day of fasting to show sorrow for sin; it was the only day prescribed for such fasting.

There are other calls for occasional fasting in the Old Testament at times when there is special need to show repentance or to call on the name of the Lord – as with the inhabitants of Nineveh after Jonah had preached to them (Jonah 3:7-9).

Jesus, of course, fasted for 40 days after his baptism and before he began his public ministry. He fasted so that he might focus upon prayer, seeking the Father's help for the work he had been sent to do.

And Saul, after he had been stopped in his tracks by an encounter with the risen Lord Jesus went without food or drink for 3 days while he prayed to understand what had happened to him.

And there is also a remarkable double reference to fasting at the beginning of Acts 13 (verses 1-3):

Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

Fasting, accompanied with prayer, focussed the whole of one's being on seeking after God for special guidance, mercy or blessing.

But the Pharisees had turned fasting into a routine part of their religious devotions. They fasted twice a week, every Monday and Thursday, and they wanted everyone to notice that they did so.

Jesus speaks of fasting against this background of Pharisaic legalism. Jesus neither commands routine fasting nor does he forbid it. What he does say is that if and when you fast, you must not do it like the Pharisees. Your focus needs to be Godward rather than manward – that is to be the whole point of it.

Treasures: Verses 19-21

I am often left uneasy when I read what Jesus has to say, as here, about money.

Three weeks ago I retired from Bible Society after working there for eighteen years. I am not 65 until September when I will receive my Old Age Pension and other pensions – but I have chosen to take the summer off rather than wait until the weather deteriorates in the Autumn. In the meantime, I have to sort out what to do with my accumulated Bible Society pension fund.

Money has been laid up for my retirement – I have stored up treasures on earth. A few years ago, the government relaxed the laws regarding pensions. You no longer have to transfer your money into an annuity. You can do what you like with it – including blowing the lot on a Lamborghini (though I don't think mine would quite stretch to that).

I am currently consulting a Financial Advisor to ensure that any decisions I make are wise and prudent.

How does that fit in with what Jesus says here? How does it fit in with the parable Jesus told of the farmer who had a bumper crop one year and decided he was going to live off it for the rest of his life? God called the man a fool.

Is it foolish or prudent to store up treasures on earth?

Let me go to the end of the passage we are looking at this evening and then work my way back in the light of what Jesus has to say.

You cannot serve two masters: Verse 24

Jesus says that no-one can serve two masters. If you try, you will be torn in two directions. There needs to be but one Lord of your life.

As Christians, we confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. And this is no empty confession for he has been given the name which is above every name and the place of authority and power over all the universe. He is Lord and demands to be Lord over every part of our lives.

In the Old Testament we read that God is a jealous God. Think, for instance of how the Ten Commandments begin in Exodus 20:

And God spoke all these words:

'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

'You shall have no other gods before me.

'You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

What does it mean that God is a 'jealous' God? I remember that when we were at St James' Lockleaze, one of those who attended the church told me that he did not like this description of God. Surely, he said, jealousy is a sin? What does it mean then that God is a jealous God?

It means that he will not share his affections with any other. God demands the undivided devotion and obedience of his people. He will not share that devotion with idols.

So the characteristic confession of God's people under the Old Covenant is what is called the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4-5):

Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

There is but one God, and he demands single-minded devotion.

So the Triune God, revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ, demands our wholehearted devotion and obedience – he will not share us with any other.

Jesus will not allow us to divide our lives into various compartments and to label them, this one is for Jesus, this one is for me. As Abraham Kuyper expressed it,

"There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!"

Or as it is sometimes expressed, "If Jesus is to be Lord *at all*, he must be Lord *of all*."

We cannot serve two masters: we cannot divide our lives into areas where we serve Christ and other areas where we serve our own interests.

When we lived in Grand Rapids USA in 1977 we helped some of the children in the household where we lived – a Dutch Reformed household – to learn their Catechism. This is where I was introduced to the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563 which starts with this wonderful question and response:

Q. What is your only comfort in life and in death?

A. That I am not my own, but belong – body and soul, in life and in death – to my faithful Saviour, Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

We belong to Jesus Christ. He has purchased us *body and soul*. He cares for us *body and soul*. So it is our comfort and joy to serve him *body and soul* with all our being and to allow no rivals to him – we are "wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him."

The eye of the body: Verses 22-23

The eye is sometimes referred to as the 'window of the soul'. The focus of the eye indicates the state of the heart.

What do you fasten your eye upon? What catches your attention and holds it?

What preoccupies your thoughts and plans when you are alone and have nothing to do? What occupies your thoughts when you are awake in the night – where is the mind's eye turned? What occupies your mind's eye when you are daydreaming on a lazy afternoon?

Are your thoughts Christ centred or are they Christ excluding?

His eye is upon us all the time (his eye is on the sparrow...); he neither slumbers nor sleeps but watches over us continually. So also, our eyes are to be fixed upon him as the source of our light and the delight of our lives.

As one modern song writer expresses it –

Jesus, be the centre
Be my source, be my light, Jesus

Jesus, be the centre
Be my hope, be my song, Jesus

Be the fire in my heart
Be the wind in these sails
Be the reason that I live
Jesus, Jesus

Jesus, be my vision
Be my path, be my guide, Jesus

As he is Lord of our whole life, so he is to be the focus of our whole life – to be at the centre of all we do.

So now, to return to the beginning:

Fasting again: Verses 16-18

Christ is to be the unrivalled centre and focus in all that we do. So our Christian lives are to be more than outward show, they are to be an expression of our devotion to him.

So then, whenever we are singing, praying, giving to the needy, meeting for the Lord's Supper, reading and meditating upon the Word or fasting, the question is, what are our eyes fixed on? Have we an eye for God and his glory or have we an eye for our own reputation?

This is a continual challenge. Our worship is always to be a Christ-centred expression of undivided devotion and of our thankfulness and joy, never something designed to impress others.

But such undivided devotion to the Lord is not to be restricted to the so-called 'spiritual' aspects of our lives, it is to characterise every aspect of our life. That is why Jesus also teaches about money since our attitude to our money is a key indicator of the degree to which Jesus is the unrivalled Lord of our entire life.

Money, again: Verses 19-21

We return now to the subject of money – the subject also of the end of verse 24.

Christ demands that he is the focus of our attitude to money and of the use of all that we possess. Our money is not our own, it belongs to the Lord. It is his gift to us and his trust to us. Jesus tells us not to store it up for ourselves but to use it for him.

In the parable of the rich fool – the farmer who said, “This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. And I’ll say to myself, ‘You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.’” Jesus concludes, “This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich towards God.” (Luke 12:21). This man made the mistake of thinking that his money was his ticket to a good life: he did not take God into account.

Jesus is not saying to us that our money is not important. On the contrary, he is urging us to see that it is a gift from God and is to be used for him. Our financial decisions require not merely a Financial Advisor but also and supremely they require wisdom from God – they require prayer. Christ must be the unrivalled Lord in all our financial decisions; we need to ask how we can best please and glorify him. Every thought and decision is to be made captive to Christ.

But Jesus also says that we should not store up treasures on earth but rather treasures in heaven. What does this mean? How do we store up treasures in heaven?

We do so by investing time, energy, money – all that we possess – in the work of the kingdom; building a kingdom that will last.

Listen to Paul’s words in 1 Timothy 6 (verses 17-19):

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.

That is storing up treasures in heaven.

We need to ask the question, what are Jesus’ priorities for the use of this money? How can I use all that he has entrusted to me wisely and for his glory. Our eyes are to be fixed on Jesus our Lord in all our considerations and in every decision that we make.

To conclude

Jesus is a demanding Lord, a jealous Lord. But he has given himself wholly to us and for us – body and soul – and he demands our undivided devotion – body and soul – in return. Nor is this a burdensome command, it is our pleasure and our chief joy, even as it shall be our glory.

Jesus, be the centre
Be my source, be my light, Jesus

Jesus, be the centre
Be my hope, be my song, Jesus

Be the fire in my heart
Be the wind in these sails
Be the reason that I live
Jesus, Jesus

Jesus, be my vision
Be my path, be my guide, Jesus

Let’s make this our prayer and guiding principle in all things.

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