

BaptistWay: Kingdom attitudes about wealth and worry

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• The **BaptistWay** lesson for **January 10** focuses on Matthew 6:19-34.

A generation ago, Bob Dylan wrote, “You’re gonna have to serve somebody, / Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord / But you’re gonna have to serve somebody.” Anyone who has heard this song has probably recognized Dylan was echoing the words of Jesus, specifically here in the Sermon on the Mount where he states: “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other” (Matthew 6:24).

Interestingly, Jesus follows these words by saying, “You cannot serve both God and money” (6:24). This is interesting—or even odd—because our ears likely do not receive the word “money” as inherently problematic or dangerous. We use money to make an honest living, pay our bills and provide basic necessities for ourselves and our families. Money, we often say, is a tool, but not bad in itself. In fact, one New Testament scholar has noted that the word used by Matthew (“Mammon”) also had a neutral connotation for first-century Jewish audiences. However, Jesus sets Mammon/money over against God. In doing so, he highlights how the quest for money will hinder our pursuit of God.

Worry and anxiety

Jesus proceeds to talk about worrying. This should be very familiar to us, since worry and anxiety drive much of our action and reflection. Consider the following topics that usually stand near the front of our minds: terrorism and global geopolitics, national election cycles, and the future of society for the next generation, both generally (for example, national debt)

and particularly (for instance, college education for children and grandchildren). These and many other topics prompt us to worry. When we do so, we act out of fear and self-preservation, at best ignoring the plight of others and at worst perpetrating additional injustices on others.

In some Bibles, the subheadings indicate Jesus talks about money, then moves on to a new topic—worrying. This is partially true. The text certainly progresses in this manner, but there is an organic relationship between these two subjects. Money often lies at the heart of our worry and anxiety. Think about how much money is spent on peace of mind in the form of insurance (automobile, home, life, health) or protection against identity theft each year. In other words, this is money dedicated to prepare for the possibility of collision, calamity, illness, fraud or even death.

And while there is nothing inherently wrong with preparation of this sort, we ought to recognize how the companies that offer such services benefit from our anxieties. Their advertisements certainly bear this out. The money paid does not provide anything initially, but it offers the promise of security in the event of loss and alleviation of our anxieties about the future. Meanwhile, Jesus is telling us not to worry.

Not about improved investment strategies

Taking Bob Dylan and Jesus seriously means we cannot read this passage as a call for better (eternal) investment strategies. In other words, when Jesus says, “Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven” (6:20), he is not asking us to find better opportunities to invest our money.

One scholar sees these passages in Matthew 6 as a commentary on the Lord’s Prayer, which immediately precedes it (Matthew 6:9-13). That means we find some clarification and further discussion of the brief phrases found in the prayer in this passage. Among other things, we are to pray: “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us

this day our daily bread” (6:10-11).

This is not what we call “investment,” which usually involves contributing money in such a manner that we receive that money—and more, we hope—in the future. Jesus is likely asking us to move on from investment altogether. About this passage, Augustine writes, “If someone does something with the intent of gaining earthly profit, that one’s heart is upon the earth.” On the whole, then, we might see investment as another facet of the “worry culture” we discussed earlier. Its message is “Invest well and control the future.” Jesus tells us that we cannot control the future: “Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?” (6:27).

Radical change in perspective

Instead of worrying, Jesus redirects our attention toward enjoying the world as God created it. While this may seem like a minor shift of perspective, it produces a drastically different result. Rather than self-preservation and selfish acts performed out of fear, when we are free from such worrying, we can become more Christ-like. We can “seek first [God’s] kingdom and [God’s] righteousness” (6:33). In other words, we can become people who serve others because we are not worried about tomorrow (6:34).

The other place in Matthew’s gospel where he discusses “treasures in heaven” involves a man who is advised to “sell your possessions and give to the poor” (Matthew 19:21). In Jesus’ view, this man’s wealth was preventing him from following Jesus.

A community of trust

Finally, we should understand when we “seek first” the kingdom of God, we are better able to recognize the “treasures in heaven” promised by God. This requires a community of trust, not only people who trust God to provide for their needs, but trust that God has placed them in a community

that also cares for them. Only in this manner can we ensure we serve God rather than money and worry, and only in this manner will we experience the abundance of God's rich blessings.